**Recalibrate: Reverse, Reverse**

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# Recalibrate: Reverse, Reverse

by Jenyifer

Summary


Luo Binghe is dying.

Mobei-jun is hiding a secret big enough to change both of their lives.

When the two best friends wake up inside the pages of Mobei's own fantasy novel, they discover that stories aren't nearly as easy to write from the inside.

Between ancient demons, reluctant kings, abandoned children, and a world slowly losing itself, they'll have to decide what kind of ending is worth fighting for.


Notes

Mobei-Jun is the writer of "Emperor of Darkness, King of Ice." Luo Binghe is his best friend and, unbeknownst to Luo Binghe, Mobei-Jun's biggest fan. The plot of the novel is about Cumplane being kick-ass demons. When Luo Binghe finds out about Mobei-Jun being the author of his favorite series, they are teleported into the novel as humans.

See the end of the work for more notes

# Chapter 1

Luo Binghe had a deep passion for trashy web novels, particularly those set in fantastical worlds filled with demons and magic. His all-time favorite was *"Emperor of Darkness, King of Ice,"* a captivating story that followed Shen Qingqiu, an immortal demon emperor and a beautiful, stoic hero. Shen Qingqiu's intelligence and cunning allowed him to outsmart anyone who posed a threat to him or his loved ones.

Most fans shipped Shen Qingqiu with Shang Qinghua, the lovable yet chaotic Northern King of Demons. Despite Shang Qinghua's cowardice and Shen Qingqiu's overconfidence, they formed an unconquerable duo, solving both human and demon issues with a blend of style and humor that left readers in stitches.

Luo Binghe's dedication to the series was unparalleled. He owned every piece of merchandise related to Shen Qingqiu and attended conventions dressed as his beloved demon emperor. He even auditioned for a speaking role in the upcoming animated adaptation of the series.

However, when Luo Binghe read the latest mega update, he couldn't believe the uncanny coincidences it had with his own life lately. At first, it seemed too surreal to be true.

Luo Binghe felt a sickening churn in his stomach as he read the conversation between Shen Qingqiu and Shang Qinghua.

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In the latest chapter, Shang Qinghua had been kidnapped by his uncle and cursed with a seemingly unbreakable spell that incapacitated him to the brink of death. Shen Qingqiu, with the aid of Liu Qingge, managed to rescue him. However, Shang Qinghua, determined to shield Shen Qingqiu from the truth, concealed the full extent of his curse while desperately searching for a cure. Despite his efforts, nothing could be done to reverse the curse, and Shang Qinghua deteriorated into a mere shadow of his once mischievous self.

Realizing he hadn't heard from Shang Qinghua in a week, Shen Qingqiu decided to visit his friend. Upon arrival, he was horrified to find the Northern King so weak that he couldn't even lift his head from his pillow.

"Hey… you're not supposed to be here… Are you here? Sorry, I can't do formality, gege," Shang Qinghua said weakly. As Shen Qingqiu approached, his expression one of utter devastation—as if he were witnessing kittens being curb-stomped—Shang Qinghua decided to rip off the bandage. "I couldn’t find a cure for the curse… you’re going to have to find someone else to drag along on your adventures."

Shen Qingqiu fell to his knees next to the bed, gently running a hand through Shang Qinghua’s curly honey-blond hair. The world around him seemed to fade away, leaving only the two of them in that moment. He couldn’t think straight; anger and despair were competing to burst from his mouth as he stared into his best friend’s eyes, searching for some glimmer of hope.

Finally, he spoke, his voice trembling with emotion. “You can’t leave me. I won’t let you. Who else can I truly be myself with? I won’t go out adventuring at all if I don’t have you by my side. You expand my world, Shang Qinghua, and without you… what’s the point of having ultimate power if… I… if you…”

The words hung in the air, each syllable weighted with the gravity of their shared experiences, their laughter, their struggles, and the unyielding bond that had formed between them. Shen Qingqiu’s heart felt like it was shattering, each piece echoing the silent pain of loss that loomed over them like a dark cloud.

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Luo Binghe's heart ached as he read the words, the parallels to his own life becoming increasingly unsettling. His time on Earth was unfortunately drawing to a close. He had received a diagnosis of stage 4 glioblastoma, an extremely aggressive brain tumor with an expiration date of six to twelve months if he was lucky. He had held off on telling his friends, clinging to the hope that some sort of treatment would buy him more time, but it hadn’t.

Just last week, his best friend Mobei-Jun had come to his home in person. Mobei-Jun was an extreme recluse, and Luo Binghe could count on one hand the number of times his best friend of seven years had even stepped into his room. During that visit, Luo Binghe had revealed his diagnosis, his voice trembling as he spoke. To his surprise, Mobei-Jun had talked more in that one visit than he had in years, his normally quiet demeanor giving way to a torrent of emotions as he processed the news.

The conversation had been raw and heartfelt, filled with confessions and fears. It was a moment of vulnerability that Luo Binghe had cherished, yet the weight of it settled heavily on his chest. The exact situation with Shang Qinghua and Shen Qingqiu felt like an eerie reflection of his own reality, as if fate was mocking him by drawing these parallels.

Luo Binghe couldn't shake the feeling that he was living in a tragic web novel of his own. Just like Shen Qingqiu felt helpless in the face of Shang Qinghua's suffering, Luo Binghe felt equally powerless against his own fate. The thought of leaving Mobei-Jun alone in the world, struggling to cope with his absence, clawed at his heart.

As he read on, tears blurred his vision, and he found himself wishing desperately for a different ending—one where the hero didn't have to face such heartbreaking choices, where friendship could conquer even the most insurmountable odds. But reality was harsh, and all he could do was cling to the moments he had left.

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“Come on… don’t you go soft on me, Shen Qingqiu. Nothing ever affects you. I’ll be gone, but you can keep helping people. You’ve grown so strong on our missions… maybe the next Northern King won’t be a wimp like me. Come on, don’t cry,” Shang Qinghua said, trying to muster the energy to sit up. He leaned back against the wall almost immediately, the effort exhausting him.

Shen Qingqiu stood up, placing a hand on Shang Qinghua’s shoulder, pain filling his voice. “No. You didn’t tell me you were this bad off. Aren’t we friends? I’m going to save you.

There isn’t another option, do you fucking understand me?” His words came out in a fierce rush, a desperate promise that felt heavy in the air.

Shang Qinghua tried to stay awake, fighting against the pull of darkness that threatened to consume him. Just as he felt himself slipping away, he opened his eyes to a vast, high ceiling above him. The air was thick with the acrid smell of smoke and blood, and a low, rhythmic chanting filled his ears. Confusion gripped him as he rolled onto his side, taking in the sight before him. He was in a massive spell circle, lying on a pedestal at its center, surrounded by a throng of demons, their eyes gleaming with a mix of anticipation and fervor.

In the midst of this chaos, he spotted Shen Qingqiu, but something was terribly wrong. The usually composed and calm demeanor of his friend was replaced by a terrifying visage. Shen Qingqiu was in his most fearsome demon mode, his features sharp and otherworldly, power radiating from him in waves. The words spilling from his mouth were incomprehensible—an ancient language that seemed to stir the demons around them into a frenzy.

Suddenly, Shen Qingqiu broke through the throng and approached Shang Qinghua, his eyes filled with a fierce determination. As he placed his hands on Shang Qinghua’s shoulders, a brilliant flash of light enveloped them both. The energy surged through Shang Qinghua, igniting every cell in his body with an electrifying vitality. In an instant, he felt stronger than he ever had, as if he could run the world twice over.

Overcome with exhilaration, he opened his mouth to let out a yell of victory. But the sound caught in his throat as he looked up at his best friend. Shen Qingqiu stood above him, a radiant smile on his face, but it was a smile tinged with something bittersweet. A realization crashed over Shang Qinghua like a wave, and he felt his heart drop.

Shen Qingqiu was human. The transformation he had undergone was not just a display of power; it was a sacrifice. With horror, Shang Qinghua could hear the steady beat of his friend's heart, a sound that felt both foreign and familiar. Shen Qingqiu had given up his immortal demon life to save him, to pull him back from the edge of death.

“No… no, you can’t…” Shang Qinghua gasped, his voice trembling as he reached up to grasp Shen Qingqiu’s arms. “You did this for me?”

Shen Qingqiu knelt down, his expression tender yet resolute. “You can’t leave me, Shang Qinghua. Not like this. You mean too much to me, and I couldn't just stand by and let you go.” His voice was steady, but the underlying emotion was palpable. The chanting of the demons faded into the background, replaced by the pounding of Shang Qinghua's heart, the weight of Shen Qingqiu's sacrifice pressing down on him like a heavy shroud.

“But... this isn’t right! You shouldn’t have to pay this price!” Shang Qinghua protested, his eyes wide with disbelief. He could see the subtle signs of strain on Shen Qingqiu’s face, the way his breath came a little too fast, the faint sheen of sweat on his brow. “You’re human now. There’s so much at stake!”

Shen Qingqiu shook his head, his smile unwavering despite the situation. “I would do it again in a heartbeat. You have to understand, Shang Qinghua—your life is worth everything to me. The world needs you. Without you, I have no purpose.”

The demons surrounding them roared in excitement, their voices mingling into a cacophony of howls and cheers. It was as if they could sense the shift in power, the bond between the two friends solidifying in the face of adversity. But for Shang Qinghua, their revelry felt like a cruel reminder of the sacrifice at hand.

*To be continued.*

**Author's Note:** I will be taking a break.

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Through his haze of tears, Luo Binghe clicked through to the extras for the chapter, only to feel as though he'd been struck over the head with a heavy rock. The realization hit him hard: the writer of the web novel hadn't created any of the artwork himself. As he gazed at the concept art for Shen Qingqiu and Shang Qinghua, accompanied by notes penned in Mobei-Jun's familiar handwriting, Luo Binghe felt a deep pang in his soul.

There were little annotations about how Shang Qinghua exuded a charisma that drew everyone in, and a description of the original Shen Qingqiu as tall and nerdy, his hands disproportionately large, with a note about the outward mask of pomposity he wore. It all clicked into place—his best friend, Mobei-Jun, was the sole author of *"Emperor of Darkness, King of Ice."*

The revelation struck Luo Binghe like a thunderbolt, igniting a whirlwind of emotions within him. His fingers trembled as he scrolled through the concept art, each image a testament to the deep bond shared not just between the characters, but also between the writer and his creations. Mobei-Jun had poured his heart into every stroke of the pen, every line of dialogue, breathing life into a world that mirrored their own friendship.

Luo Binghe felt a rush of warmth as he realized that he was the inspiration for Shang Qinghua, while Shen Qingqiu represented Mobei-Jun's idealized self. A wave of embarrassment washed over him as he recalled Mobei-Jun's lukewarm responses to Luo Binghe's enthusiastic conversations about his favorite book series. How had he been so blind to the connection? A weak laugh escaped him. "Maybe I can blame my blindness on my brain cancer…"

Shaking off the absurdity of his thoughts, Luo Binghe stood up, his heart racing with a mix of disbelief and anticipation. He needed to confront Mobei-Jun, to unravel the truth behind this extraordinary revelation. Everything felt surreal, but one thing was clear—he had to face his best friend and learn the full story behind the characters that had become so intertwined with their own lives. With a sense of urgency propelling him forward, Luo Binghe prepared to seek answers.

# Chapter 2: Chapter 2

Mobei-Jun could barely see straight; he was utterly inebriated. He had squandered what little time remained with Luo Binghe. In a fit of rage, he had yelled at his best friend, refusing to accept the painful reality that Luo Binghe was dying. Once his anger subsided and he returned home, Mobei-Jun researched glioblastoma and lost all hope.

In his despair, he poured his sorrows into his novel, the words spilling out in a raw, unrefined torrent. He did not care that his editor would furious over a free 50,000-word update. He was beyond caring about consequences. This break from routine was unplanned, but what was the point of money or success if he could no longer hear Luo Binghe excitedly discuss the plot?

Mobei-Jun attempted to curl up in his closet, an awkward fit for his massive frame. He was a behemoth, nearly scraping the ceiling with his bulk. Yet, in that cramped space, he found a strange form of comfort. He took another swig of vodka, letting the burn wash over him. Leaning his head back, memories of sunny days with Luo Binghe flooded his mind. He desperately searched for a way to make amends, hoping his friend could forgive him for storming out after the diagnosis was revealed.

Mobei-Jun could not tell if he was awake or dreaming when his apartment door swung open with a bang. The loud, overconfident voice of Luo Binghe filled the dimly lit room.

“You turned me into a short, cutesy demon? How could you not tell me, Mobei-Jun?! We’re best friends! Were you laughing at me every time I dragged you to conventions or special edition release nights?” Luo Binghe stood there, his curly hair a wild tornado around him, making it hard to believe anything was truly wrong.

Mobei-Jun was still grappling with his friend’s choice to embrace his inner nerd so openly, especially when Luo Binghe possessed the athletic capability to chase down and befriend a cheetah. Yet here they were—Luo Binghe was terminally ill, and now he was apparently furious. Mobei-Jun groaned, pulling a shirt over his head, and mumbled loudly, “Not now!”

“Yes, now! Why are you hiding in the closet? Oh my god, are you about to confess your feelings? I’m dying here, dude! You really aren’t my type, and I know you way too well for that.” Luo Binghe tugged at Mobei-Jun’s arm, his urgency palpable despite the ineffectiveness of the pull. He scrunched his nose and stepped back, suddenly overwhelmed by the stench of alcohol. “Dude, you reek! Come on, talk to me. I deserve your honesty today.”

Mobei-Jun sat up, the room spinning as he struggled for clarity. He downed the last of the vodka in one gulp, focusing on the burn sliding down his throat to process the confrontation. His biggest secret was out: his best friend had discovered that Mobei-Jun wrote *Emperor of Darkness, King of Ice*. Even more shocking, Luo Binghe had unknowingly inspired the character of Shang Qinghua.

Mobei-Jun kept his gaze fixed on the floor. “I was heavy-handed with the latest chapter. I didn’t tell you because even you were shipping Shen Qingqiu and Shang Qinghua together. I

thought if you knew, you'd assume I had romantic feelings for you."

"The highest form of flattery is when people think you're in a relationship with your best friend. Haven't you heard? Besides, I've known you far too long for that to come between us." A wave of fatigue washed over Luo Binghe. He cursed his tumor under his breath as he collapsed onto Mobei-Jun's bed, trying to appear casual while hugging a pillow. "I'm just fascinated by how you turned me into a tiny twink of a king while casting yourself as a slim, stunning demon emperor."

"You're the inspiration for the character, not a direct copy, Luo Binghe. It's fantasy, and to me, you're still just… short." Mobei-Jun felt a tight knot of anxiety settle in his throat as he locked eyes with Luo Binghe's amber gaze. "I should have told you sooner. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have stormed out when you told me… I don't have a demon ritual that can save you."

Luo Binghe felt the weight of his emotions crashing over him as he watched Mobei-Jun clumsily rise to clean up the space. He tried to fight off the impending exhaustion, eager to steer the conversation back to safer waters. "I'm going to die. But you'll be incredibly successful; our friendship is the inspiration for your ticket to immortality, Mobei-Jun. When I'm gone, people will embrace your books and anime even more. I wish I could have seen it… do you have any concept stills from the show?"

Mobei-Jun dropped a bowl, shattering it into jagged pieces. The sharp sound echoed in the silence, accompanied by a wave of pain so intense he thought he might be sick. In a flash, he turned and sat beside Luo Binghe, glaring fiercely. "Don't say that."

"I'm going to die. Get used to it. Even now, just watching you makes my eyelids feel like the heaviest things in the universe," Luo Binghe retorted, a familiar anger bubbling up that made his hairs stand on end.

"You. Are. Not. Leaving. Me." Mobei-Jun grabbed the collar of Luo Binghe's shirt, his voice dropping to a low, primal growl.

At that exact moment, the room began to spin. A blinding light erupted around them, accompanied by a crackling electronic hum, signaling that neither man was on Earth anymore.

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# Chapter 3: Chap 3

When the situation surrounding the next emperor spiraled into chaos, Shen Qingqiu, now a weakened human, found himself whisked away by his decisive best friend, Shang Qinghua. They retreated to their humble hideout among the bamboo trees in the human realm. The sanctuary was not extravagant, but it sufficed as a temporary haven where they could formulate a plan to regain control. Both men were still reeling from the upheaval, barely managing to process what had transpired.

After a moment of silence, Shen Qingqiu spoke, attempting to ease the tension caused by Shang Qinghua's restless, glowing blue eyes. "I still have some qi left; it is not completely gone. Sure, I am human now and weaker, but… I might still be able to stand on my own."

"It would help if you understood the ritual you performed," Shang Qinghua replied, his voice edged with frustration. "Are you absolutely sure you saw an illusion I couldn't see, complete with text, before you put your hands on me? I am still trying to wrap my head around how that happened while I was staring right at you."

Shang Qinghua's expression revealed that he was wrestling with the unsettling possibility that his long-time friend had miscalculated the effects of the power boosts, inadvertently stumbling into a forbidden spell from the *System of Magic* tome. No matter how he analyzed the situation, Shang Qinghua could not shake the feeling that he should be dead. Instead, Shen Qingqiu had become vulnerable in the eyes of every creature—yet somehow, the sneak retained power while the emperor lost his.

With a sense of urgency, Shen Qingqiu grabbed a calligraphy brush and paper, determined to recreate the message that had appeared before him.

**[Emergency System Request: Split your power in half and lose true immortality. Launching System Protocol: Saving functions or Maintain Fate.]**

He sighed heavily as he pushed the paper across the table to Shang Qinghua. A wave of frustration washed over him; he felt cheated by whatever the spell offered. After all, Shen Qingqiu had been emperor for a reason—no one could rival the immense magical reserves he cultivated over the years.

"The fucking text box lied either way," Shen Qingqiu growled, his voice thick with irritation. "We should burn that tome for peace of mind. I know we are on the run, and I could feasibly die from a cold, but… I don't think all is necessarily lost."

His eyes met Shang Qinghua's, searching for a glimmer of hope amidst the chaos. Shen Qingqiu refused to believe they were truly out of options. His heart sank at the harshness in Shang Qinghua's face as his friend examined the diagram. The reality of their situation loomed over them like an ominous cloud, completely overshadowing the warmth of their previous camaraderie with a chill of uncertainty.

“I saved you. Truly, this is a thousand times better than if I had suffered your death,” Shen Qingqiu insisted, reaching out to grasp Shang Qinghua’s clawed hand.

Shang Qinghua snatched his hand away, the motion sharp and defensive. “So now you can die, bro?” he retorted, his voice laden with frustration. “I fail to see how our situations are improved by the weaker of us having their powers. I can’t protect us from everything. There is a bullseye on your forehead, and that’s not even considering the very real possibility that you might fall off a horse and hit your pretty head.”

With that, Shang Qinghua rose abruptly, his agitation manifesting as he paced the room. The cold aura radiating from him extinguished the cheerful flicker of the fire, plunging the space into a tense silence.

Shen Qingqiu watched his friend, feeling the weight of their predicament settle heavily on his shoulders. “I am not asking you to protect me from everything,” he said softly, trying to cut through the tension. “But we can’t give up hope. We still have each other, and there has to be a way out of this.”

Shang Qinghua stopped mid-stride, turning to face Shen Qingqiu with eyes flashing with a mix of anger and concern. “Hope doesn’t change the fact that your life is in danger, Shen Qingqiu! We may be together, but that doesn’t mean I can shield you from every threat out there. You need to understand that—”

“And you need to let me take some of the burden!” Shen Qingqiu interrupted, his voice rising in exasperation. “I may be weaker now, but I am still capable of fighting. We can adapt. We always have.”

A heavy silence enveloped them, thick with tension as they both grasped the gravity of their situation. Shen Qingqiu could see the turmoil in Shang Qinghua’s eyes—the protective instinct to fight against the odds clashed with the paralyzing fear of losing him once more.

At last, Shang Qinghua let out a weary sigh, the rigid determination fading from his posture. “Fine. But you have to promise me you will be careful.”

Before Shen Qingqiu could respond, a blinding flash of light erupted in the room, overwhelming them both. Shen Qingqiu instinctively curled up, screams escaping his lips as he was engulfed in a searing brightness. Ominous words materialized before him:

**[Saving System Protocol: Status: Fully online. Begin mission Objective: Reunite with Shen Qingqiu’s magic.]**

A wrenching sensation gripped him, as if he were being drawn through a narrow funnel. Just as abruptly as it began, the sensation ceased. He blinked his eyes open to find Shang Qinghua had dashed outside, staring up at the sky in shock. Shen Qingqiu struggled to his feet, his legs unsteady as he joined his friend. What he saw made his heart race—red and black sparks trailed across the sky, vanishing into the distance in a straight line.

Swallowing hard, Shen Qingqiu turned to Shang Qinghua. “If I had to guess, that was the system taking the other half of my magic. It felt eerily similar to when I touched you on the

altar. Maybe we can follow it."

Shang Qinghua spun around, his face a mix of skepticism and determination as he processed their options. Without flight or a clear destination, they were at a standstill. But then a grin broke across Shang Qinghua's face. He grabbed Shen Qingqiu by the wrist and pulled him back inside, guiding him straight to the bed. With a playful shove, he forced his friend under the blankets, his eyes sparkling in the dim light.

"Okay, listen up! I have a plan. You need to chat with Meng Mo—he totally has a soft spot for you. Convince him to help you track down this system in your dreams. If it is siphoning your demonic energy, then it is not completely severed… which is a good thing! I will just focus on keeping your qi meridians stable here."

"But you still have your demonic energy! If I just talked you through a—" Shen Qingqiu began, but Shang Qinghua cut him off with a wave of his hand.

"Whoa, whoa, hold on! It is your turn to trust me, alright? Master Meng Mo is basically your biggest fan. I am telling you, if you act fast, you might actually get something out of this." With a flourish, Shang Qinghua tucked Shen Qingqiu in snugly and dimmed the lights. It wasn't much, but Shang Qinghua knew they could not rely solely on his tracking skills. They needed a plan, and this was the best shot they had.

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# Chapter 4: Chapter 4

Luo Binghe felt an odd sense of familiarity in this dream, which teemed with a power and energy he had not truly felt in years. He felt young again, reliving his childhood memories. Had he finally died? The last thing he recalled was lying down on Mobei-Jun's bed, watching his friend fumble around, too intoxicated to notice Luo Binghe's quiet amusement.

In this dreamscape, he found himself running with Mobei-Jun through the fields next to his mother's home. They raced toward the massive, shady tree at the edge of the fence where Luo Binghe used to hide. Of course, Mobei-Jun's presence here was pure fiction; Luo Binghe had not met him until he was adopted and brought to the city at age six. Still, he wanted to savor this false reality as long as possible, hoping his mother would soon call him inside after finishing with her massage customers. Luo Binghe climbed easily into the tree branches, closing his eyes to enjoy the peaceful afternoon sounds. He could even hear the dream version of Mobei-Jun attempting to catch bugs in the flowers below.

"You will return what is mine at once. Face me in your true form," a cold, commanding voice pierced the tranquility.

Luo Binghe's eyes snapped open. He looked down at the base of the tree and spotted the most breathtaking man he had ever seen. Dressed in black with accents of gold and green, the stranger clutched a fan in his hand.

Luo Binghe's heart raced as he recognized Shen Qingqiu, the character who had haunted his thoughts for years. The sight of the demon emperor in this dream sent a shiver of anticipation down his spine. He tried, and failed, to change his own form. With a frustrated sigh, he leaned back against the tree trunk.

"This is a dream, Shizun," Luo Binghe said, waggling his eyebrows suggestively. "If you want something, take it. I'd love to be a naughty schoolboy in your demon's course on human anatomy. Though I'm not really a fan of being stuck in a five-year-old's body, so… fix that first." If this was going to turn into a vivid fantasy, he hoped to gain some control over it.

Shen Qingqiu's eyes narrowed, his expression stern and entirely unamused. "This is your dream realm, child, not mine. If you desire to change, do it yourself. However, the only anatomy class I will hold over your body is demonstrating how long your entrails can stretch. Get down here and answer me." His voice carried immense authority. He pushed magic into his words, trying to compel the little boy—who was dressed in white with glowing red eyes and the Shen family crest on his forehead—to stop grinning like a fool.

"What is your name? For what purpose are you using my magic?" Shen Qingqiu demanded, his patience wearing thin.

Luo Binghe's grin faltered as he realized this would not be the kind of dream he had hoped for. The power behind Shen Qingqiu's words made him shiver, compelling him to obey. He climbed down from the branches, his small form landing lightly on the ground. Luo Binghe's defiant stance melted away under the Emperor of Darkness's intense gaze. The supreme ruler

was not someone to be trifled with, and the small boy felt the crushing weight of his presence.

“My name is Luo Binghe,” he repeated, his voice now carrying a distinct tremor. “This is just a weird scenario I’ve thought up… you are so angry at me, Shen Qingqiu. I’ve just been playing around.”

Shen Qingqiu’s eyes blazed with an unearthly fire as he stepped forward, his presence completely overwhelming. “You have stolen my demonic magic, child. You cannot hide from me.” With a swift motion, he lifted Luo Binghe and slammed him against the tree trunk. Leaves cascaded down, tangling in the boy's long, curly black hair. Luo Binghe’s wide, glowing red eyes stared back in horrified confusion, his earlier bravado entirely shattered.

“I will find you,” Shen Qingqiu continued in a cold, commanding whisper. “There is no use running from me. I may be human now, but I am still the Emperor of Darkness. With King Shang Qinghua at my side, it is only a matter of time.”

Luo Binghe’s breath caught as the intense power radiating from Shen Qingqiu caused his heart to race uncontrollably. This felt far too real to be a mere fantasy about the anti-hero of *Emperor of Darkness, King of Ice*. Even in the pages of that novel, Shen Qingqiu had been cold yet deeply understanding—possessing an intelligence and grace capable of drawing out the best in even the most feral beings. And now, that exact emperor was actively searching for him and Mobei-Jun.

Tears welled up in Luo Binghe's eyes as he clung desperately to Shen Qingqiu’s arms, his small voice trembling with genuine fear. “I didn’t mean to steal your magic! I didn’t even know that was possible! I don’t know where I am; this is all too much for me. Please don’t kill me. I’m already dying anyway—just wait, and I’ll be gone. Please, just put me down!”

“You… are telling the truth,” Shen Qingqiu said, his voice losing some of its sharp edge. He could not ignore the raw sincerity in the child's plea. The situation was far more complex than he had initially assumed; it seemed the boy was as much a victim of circumstance as he was.

As Shen Qingqiu released his grip, a familiar metallic chime resonated in his mind. A transparent, floating screen materialized, visible only to him.

***[Saving System: SubQuest - Breaking Shizun’s Heart. Tasks: Train Luo Binghe, locate Luo Binghe, meet in person. Reward: 1 jade pendant +1000 High Seas points. Unlocks Quest: Returning Shizun to Power. Accept? Deny Fate?]***

Shen Qingqiu's eyes narrowed at the sudden intrusion of the system's message. It was a grim reminder of the twisted game he was ensnared in, with stakes that had never been higher. The tantalizing prospect of regaining his lost powers clashed heavily with the daunting tasks laid out before him.

He growled softly, reading the bizarre text over and over until it felt as though time itself had frozen. He had no desire to play along with this magical entity, yet he understood that refusing the path would leave both him and Shang Qinghua vulnerable, hunted like prey.

His gaze shifted back to Luo Binghe, who remained frozen on the ground. At least the child who had inadvertently siphoned his power was far from dull. Shen Qingqiu made a silent vow to keep his distance, reminding himself that once the reward was claimed, he could easily end the boy's life in the waking world without a second thought.

With a resigned sigh, Shen Qingqiu pressed "Accept." Instantly, reality surged back, the weight of his decision pressing heavily on his shoulders.

Luo Binghe immediately noticed the transformation in the emperor's expression. The man before him now exuded an aura of profound kindness, exactly as he had always imagined the novel's true hero would. Shen Qingqiu's beauty and grace wrapped around him like a comforting blanket, instilling a sense of peace that soothed his troubled heart. Shaking his head to clear the daze, Luo Binghe reached out, tugging gently at the elegant robes. “Please, I’m so lost. I need your help. I’ll be your disciple for the rest of my life. I will worship at your feet, Xia.”

Shen Qingqiu let out an exasperated breath as he looked down at the fervent boy. With a softening gaze, he bent down and effortlessly lifted Luo Binghe into his arms, carrying him to a nearby bench. His voice was gentle yet firm. “You can address me as Shizun. I will help you, but in return, you must help me find my student.”

Overwhelmed by a profound sense of safety, Luo Binghe could only nod. He would do anything for this man, even if he turned out to be a mere figment of his imagination.

Suddenly, a vigorous shaking shattered the vision. Startled, Luo Binghe snapped his eyes open. The dreamscape dissolved completely, and he found the real-world Mobei-Jun hovering over him, holding him tightly rather than Shen Qingqiu.

They found themselves in a cozy cabin, the warm scent of wood and metal filling the air. Mobei-Jun’s appearance, however, was strikingly different from the last time Luo Binghe had seen him. Startled, Luo Binghe scrambled backward, taking in the sharper features of his friend. Mobei-Jun was dressed in impractical robes that accentuated his muscular physique, revealing a tantalizing glimpse of toned skin. His straight, fine hair cascaded down to his waist—a look Luo Binghe knew was impossible to maintain in his friend's small, cramped real-world room.

As he processed this new reality, Luo Binghe caught sight of his own reflection in a standing mirror. Rising to his feet, he approached the glass and gingerly touched his face. His long, pointed nails grazed his cheeks, a sensation both foreign and thrilling. Staring back at him was a visage that could only be described as demonic: blackened fingers, fiery red eyes, and Shen Qingqiu's red symbol glowing faintly on his forehead. His body was impressively ripped, though not as exaggerated as Mobei-Jun's; his own robes were similarly disheveled, and his hair tumbled wildly around his face.

Finally, Luo Binghe exclaimed, “What the actual fuck is going on? I feel awake. I feel alive.”

Mobei-Jun hesitated, his expression a mix of confusion and concern. “I… I think we’re in my novel,” he stammered. “I’ve done some digging. When I came back, you… you looked like a demon. I definitely didn’t write you that way. I was just brainstorming some side characters

because the animation studio suggested adding a B-plot with more lovable friends. I hadn't named them yet—just rough descriptions." Each word seemed to cause Mobei-Jun pain, his eyes searching Luo Binghe's face as if trying to decipher a puzzle.

"Our characters are strangers to the peak systems. I'm a master blacksmith who can imbue metal with magic. You're my apprentice. And, as far as I know, we're both supposed to be human… but when you woke up, did you see a text box before you? I did." Mobei-Jun hesitated for a moment before placing a hand on Luo Binghe's back, grounding them both in this strange new reality. Deep down, Mobei-Jun selfishly wished they could remain here forever—where Luo Binghe wouldn't face an early death. He would make sure of that.

"No? I did have a dream where I met Shen Qingqiu, though," Luo Binghe replied, his voice trembling slightly. Suddenly pale, he turned to look up at Mobei-Jun, still adjusting to the differences in his friend's face. "He said I'd taken his power and that he was going to find me. Mobei-Jun, what was supposed to happen after Shen Qingqiu saved Shang Qinghua's life? How did he do it?"

Mobei-Jun's voice quavered as he searched for the right words. "I… I didn't plan it. I wrote that chapter from a place of deep pain—the kind that comes from the fear of losing you. I envisioned a scenario where they could defy death, where their friendship would overcome Shen Qingqiu's demonic powers. But… I never intended to write again. I wanted to spend all my remaining time with you instead." He turned away, unable to meet Luo Binghe's gaze, the gravity of his confession hanging heavily in the air.

Luo Binghe felt a warmth in his heart at Mobei-Jun's willingness to be there for him, even after their fight. He appreciated that Mobei-Jun had paused everything to support him during his final months. He knew that some might misinterpret their bond, but to him, they were brothers—connected by a light that transcended blood. Luo Binghe couldn't scold Mobei-Jun for his reckless writing, even if it had landed them in a precarious situation. He had spent weeks grappling with his own fate, and he couldn't fathom what he would have done in the same position. Whatever he might have written would have been dark, suffused with despair.

A knot tightened in Luo Binghe's stomach. "But what if Shen Qingqiu was real in my dream? What if he's coming for me? He said he'd teach me, but if I were him, I'd murder me."

Mobei-Jun took a deep breath, trying to steady himself. "Well… we'll have to hide you. We have the advantage of being new here. The peak lords aren't fond of demons… hopefully, they saw you as human when we set up shop. But I can't help you in your dreams. And we also need to consider Shang Qinghua. He has all his power and motivation to track us down."

With sudden determination, Mobei-Jun strode over to a rack of weapons and tossed a sword to Luo Binghe, his expression deadly serious. "We should practice if you're not too tired. I won't let anything happen to you in this universe. Not when I'm the one who wrote it."

Luo Binghe caught the sword, feeling its weight in his hand—a tangible reminder of their resolve. "Okay," he said, a spark of courage igniting within him. "Let's do this together." Together, they would confront whatever challenges lay ahead, united by their friendship and a shared determination to carve out a future where they could both thrive.

# Chapter 5: Chapter 5

Mobei-Jun possessed a general sense of their surroundings, thanks to a rough draft he had written about two nameless master blacksmiths and their apprentice. However, he remained uncertain of their standing with the Lord of Wan Jian Peak, especially since their cabin sat so far removed from the cultivators' dwellings. He suspected they would need all hands on deck if the demon realm was in turmoil—a chaos likely caused by Shen Qingqiu losing his immortality and hiding alongside Shang Qinghua.

Mobei-Jun did his best to present an intimidating facade as he glanced at Luo Binghe, who was practically bouncing on his feet, eager to begin. Their sword practice had been a success; it seemed their bodies instinctively remembered intricate fighting patterns they had never consciously studied. Unfortunately, the System was proving to be particularly chatty with Mobei-Jun. Ever since he had opened his eyes in this world, it had bombarded him with constant updates and suggestions for their "masterpiece." He resorted to giving it brief, one-word responses, which seemed to suffice. Currently, he had muted the notifications, but as he stepped onto the path leading toward the peak lord, he allowed himself to access the menu.

*Any objections to this course of action?* he thought.

**[Saving System: User001: expanding characters and locations ++ intrigue over the half-demon — fighting ++ knowledge +++ suggestion. Initiate Relationship branch BingBei? Yes or No]**

Mobei-Jun scowled and growled internally, *Never.* He aggressively swiped his hand through the 'No' option. He watched Luo Binghe happily greet people as they walked, clearly wanting everyone to see him. So much for keeping a low profile. Then again, Mobei-Jun did not doubt that the novel's original heroes would find them soon anyway.

A young, eager-looking disciple whom Mobei-Jun believed was named Chen Hao stopped waving his hands and called out, “Sir, all hands are needed. There’s an emergency. They are going to want an explanation for what is happening with your apprentice. How did he become a demon overnight?”

“He is still my apprentice,” Mobei-Jun replied firmly. He tilted his head, signaling for Luo Binghe to take over the conversation as they ascended the mountain. Almost instantly, he regretted it. Luo Binghe’s favorite topic was the relationship between Shen Qingqiu and Shang Qinghua, and recent events had only confirmed his friend's belief in their undying love.

Mobei-Jun quickened his pace, trying to block out the chatter. He wanted to actively forget that his ideal type was out there scheming to kill his best friend. It would be disingenuous to say he had never indulged in his fandom’s fan fiction, but he was highly selective—only the sharpest, most nuanced portrayals of Shang Qinghua piqued his interest, preferably ones that did not involve Shen Qingqiu. He hoped that if they ever met, he would find a way to survive the encounter, but deep down, he had his doubts. Why hadn’t he given his own character

more power? By his own estimation, he felt like the weakest cannon fodder in his own universe.

Mobei-Jun's grip tightened around the hilt of his massive, hammer-like sword as he positioned himself protectively in front of Luo Binghe. The six peak lords rushing into the meeting hall demanded immediate attention, their faces a mixture of intense concern and authority. He could feel the weight of their gazes, the unspoken questions about his apprentice's transformation hanging heavily in the air.

“Step aside, Mobei-Jun,” Peak Lord Wei Qingwei commanded, his voice steady but edged with urgency. The piercing intensity of his eyes bore into Mobei-Jun, trying to gauge the truth of the situation. “He could be possessed by the Emperor. We must investigate.”

Mobei-Jun’s heart raced. The thought of Luo Binghe being possessed was a terrifying prospect. He could already see the lords preparing to act, their hands twitching toward their weapons. “He is not possessed!” Mobei-Jun snapped, his voice rising in defiance. “I watched the change happen myself. This is not some sinister plot; it is a part of who he is now. You need to listen!”

Luo Binghe stepped forward, raising his hands in a peaceable gesture, his voice calm but firm. “Mobei-Jun, we are guests here. If they want to investigate me, I will cooperate. You go get the details on how we can help protect everyone against the demons.” He bumped against Mobei-Jun’s arm—a brief moment of camaraderie in the chaos—before positioning himself between his friend and the drawn swords. “I don’t even know how to use this new power yet. I highly doubt I can murder you all.”

The lords exchanged skeptical glances, uncertain whether to trust the words of a demon, even one as familiar as the blacksmith's apprentice. Mobei-Jun’s chest tightened as he watched his friend stand his ground under the scrutiny. “Luo Binghe, you can’t just—”

“I can,” Luo Binghe interrupted gently, his expression serious. “This isn’t just about us anymore. If they are afraid of what I might become, we need to show them that I am still me.”

“Fine,” Mobei-Jun relented, frustration and worry mixing in his gut. “But I am not leaving you alone with them. I will be right here.”

Wei Qingwei nodded, his gaze shifting back to Luo Binghe. “Then let us proceed with caution,” he said, his tone softening slightly. “We will investigate, but you must understand that we are doing this to protect the sect—and you.”

As they ventured deeper into the heart of the mountain, the air thickened with tension. The lords surrounded Luo Binghe, their expressions a mix of wariness and curiosity. Mobei-Jun walked silently beside him, a looming presence that exuded an unspoken protective authority. He remained vigilant, eyes narrowed as he assessed the room.

“Let’s begin,” Wei Qingwei commanded, motioning for Luo Binghe to step forward. “We need to discern the nature of your transformation.”

Luo Binghe smirked, confidence radiating from him like heat. “What do you want me to do, play the demon for you?” he quipped, his tone laced with a hint of mischief. “Just say the word, and I’ll put on a real show.”

One of the other lords, a stern-looking woman with an air of absolute authority, stepped forward. “We need to assess your spiritual energy. If you are indeed unpossessed, we should be able to detect your true essence. However, the Emperor’s influence may be lurking beneath the surface, masked by dark energy.”

Mobei-Jun’s presence loomed larger, a silent guardian ready to spring into action at a moment’s notice. He did not speak, but his fierce gaze conveyed a protective warning.

“Enough,” Luo Binghe said, his voice turning serious yet defiant. “I am still me, and I will prove it. Just don’t freak out when things get a little chaotic.” He stepped forward, completely unfazed by the scrutiny surrounding him.

The lords exchanged uncertain glances. After a moment of hesitation, Wei Qingwei nodded. “Proceed, but be advised that we will be ready to defend ourselves if necessary.”

Luo Binghe took a deep breath, channeling the tumultuous energy swirling within him. As he closed his eyes, a faint glow began to emanate from his body, swirling with vibrant colors that danced like flames. The energy pulsed in the air, a chaotic symphony of power and defiance.

As the light intensified, a shadow flickered at the edge of Luo Binghe’s aura—dark and menacing, yet not entirely consuming. Mobei-Jun’s instincts flared, ready to defend his friend. But Luo Binghe held up a hand, a confident grin stretching across his face. “Relax, everyone. This is just a part of my new charm.”

With a determined effort, he focused, attempting to shape the dark shadow into a more manageable form around himself. Cautiously, the cultivators approached, employing their tools and spells to assess the situation. Mobei-Jun closely observed Luo Binghe, noting the way his friend suppressed the sudden tension in his shoulders. It was glaringly clear to Mobei-Jun that this clinical gathering was triggering buried, exhausting memories of the real-world doctors and the stark hospital environments Luo Binghe had endured back home.

Stepping forward, Mobei-Jun broke the silence. “You have done enough,” he said, his voice steady and reassuring. “Don’t you need us to imbue your disciples’ armor or arrows?

It is time to shift your focus

.”

Wei Qingwei stood back from Luo Binghe, looking between him and Mobei-Jun with worry written large on his face. “We must go help the other sects facing the brunt of the demons, but… I believe it would be safest if Luo Binghe were isolated in your cabin for now. Come help with the imbuing, and then you will be in charge of him, Mobei-Jun. I may not know you well, but your references speak highly of your loyalty. Report any change in Luo Binghe’s demeanor directly to me.”

Mobei-Jun nodded, understanding the weight of the command. “I will keep a close watch on him,” he promised, glancing back at Luo Binghe, whose vibrant aura flickered with uncertainty. “You can count on me.”

Luo Binghe opened his mouth to protest about wanting to be useful, but Mobei-Jun met his eyes and growled low in his throat. Letting out an annoyed sound, Luo Binghe turned on his heel and stormed back toward the house. Mobei-Jun sheathed his weapon, staring at Wei Qingwei to signal that he and the other lords should lead the way.

Wei Qingwei watched Luo Binghe leave, the youth's irritation palpable, though Mobei-Jun’s fierce gaze had successfully cut through any actual arguments. “He will come around,” Mobei-Jun said, turning back to the group. “Let’s focus on the task at hand.”

The other cultivators nodded, an immediate sense of urgency filling the air. They quickly gathered the necessary materials for imbuing weapons and armor, setting up a small workshop near the edge of the clearing. Mobei-Jun soon fell into a rhythm. The familiar, mechanical motions of preparing talismans and infusing them with protective energy helped ground his racing thoughts.

As he worked, he could not help but steal glances toward the cabin where Luo Binghe had disappeared. It wasn’t just basic worry gnawing at him; it was the persistent shadow lingering around Luo Binghe—a stark reminder of the dark energy his friend now struggled to control. Mobei-Jun recalled their real-world past, remembering how Luo Binghe always faced adversity with a loud bravado that masked deeper, systemic fears.

“Are you alright, Mobei-Jun?” Wei Qingwei asked, snapping him back to reality. The other lords were occupied, but the concern in Wei Qingwei’s tone was evident.

“Just thinking,” Mobei-Jun replied, shaking off the distraction. “We need to ensure the imbuing process is done quickly and effectively. The demons will not wait for us to be ready.”

Wei Qingwei nodded seriously. “We are counting on you. Your expertise in this area is invaluable.”

With renewed focus, Mobei-Jun dove back into the work, guiding the peak leaders as they collaborated to imbue the gear with defensive spells. As they forged a barrier of energy around the steel, he felt the tension in the air shift, the vibrant spiritual currents crackling with newfound potential.

After what felt like hours, the last weapon was successfully enchanted. Mobei-Jun wiped the sweat from his brow. “We are finished,” he announced, his voice carrying a note of triumph. “Now we just need to ensure they are used wisely.”

Wei Qingwei clasped Mobei-Jun’s forearm in recognition. “Thank you. We will try to gather information to help Luo Binghe. Stay safe.”

Mobei-Jun watched them leave in silence before heading back to the cabin, his mind feeling thoroughly exhausted. He still could not fully believe that his own fictional writing had

resulted in him actually wielding a real magic system. Idly, he flicked through his floating system notifications, but the text boxes were merely congratulating him on a successful quest. No actual, useful information was provided.

Mobei-Jun pushed the cabin door open to find Luo Binghe sitting at the small table, frowning, dressed only in his boxers and a light shirt.

Mobei-Jun spoke casually, “If a peak disciple comes in, they are going to be scandalized. The young ones are not going out to battle and will be stopping by. Put some clothes on.”

Luo Binghe looked up, his scowl deepening. “I’ve been cooped up in here, and it is too hot,” he retorted, crossing his arms defiantly. “Besides, it’s not like I am parading around outside.”

Mobei-Jun suppressed a sigh, knowing that arguing with Luo Binghe in this mood was a futile endeavor. “This isn’t about parading. You need to maintain appearances, especially around the disciples. Right now, you are a target for both admiration and scrutiny,” he replied, keeping his tone light but firm.

Luo Binghe rolled his eyes but eventually stood up. “Fine, fine. I’ll find something,” he grumbled, moving toward his belongings. Mobei-Jun watched as he rummaged through his trunk, pulling out a simple robe that hung loosely on his frame.

As Luo Binghe dressed, Mobei-Jun took a quiet moment to observe him. Despite the casual, dismissive demeanor, there was an underlying intensity in his movements—a rigid tension that hinted at a storm brewing beneath the surface. Luo Binghe was deeply restless. It was entirely obvious that confinement, even for his own safety, was something he endured poorly.

Ignoring the fact that his own muscles felt like absolute mush, Mobei-Jun gestured toward the back garden. He flashed a wolfish smile at his friend. “Beat me at wrestling, little emperor.”

Luo Binghe froze mid-motion, his robe half-closed. He turned around with a raised eyebrow. “Wrestling? You think you can take me?” His voice carried a mix of challenge and amusement, a familiar spark igniting in his amber eyes.

Mobei-Jun shrugged, feigning nonchalance despite the thrill of competition bubbling within him. “I wouldn’t challenge you if I didn’t think I had a chance. Besides, it will help you burn off some of that restless energy.”

“Is that your grand plan? To tire me out with a wrestling match?” Luo Binghe smirked, finally securing his robe and stepping forward. The playful banter was a welcome distraction from the crushing weight of their circumstances.

“Something like that,” Mobei-Jun replied, a teasing glint in his eye. “But I also think it gives you a chance to show off a bit. You have to keep your reputation as the little emperor intact, after all.”

“Careful now,” Luo Binghe warned, a hint of mischief in his smile. “You might just regret underestimating me.”

Mobei-Jun chuckled, the sound deep and rich, as he folded his arms and leaned against the wooden doorframe. “Ah, but that is where you are wrong, Luo Binghe. You are a force in your own right. I am not trying to tire you out just to keep you from fighting. I simply think a little friendly competition will do you good. It is certainly better than moping around the house.”

Luo Binghe shot him a skeptical look, pulling the fabric tighter around his waist. “Friendly competition? You call that what we did last night? It felt more like you were trying to slice me in half with a broadsword.”

“Just getting you ready for any eventualities,” Mobei-Jun replied with a smirk. “You will need to be on your toes if you want to fight alongside Shen Qingqiu. But I promise, this will be more fun.”

“Fun for you, maybe,” Luo Binghe muttered, though an undeniable spark of interest flashed in his eyes. The thought of wrestling Mobei-Jun—of engaging in an physical activity that felt like a familiar game rather than a stressful chore—was highly tempting. “What is the actual point of this? We are supposed to be conserving our energy, not expending it on silly matches.”

“Trust me. You will feel better for it,” Mobei-Jun said, his voice dropping to a more serious tone. “You have been cooped up for too long. You need to let off some steam. And who knows? You might actually surprise yourself.”

Luo Binghe hesitated, the deep restlessness gnawing at him like a persistent itch. He took a deep breath, consciously trying to quell the anxious tension coiling in his chest. “Fine. But if I lose, you have to promise to help me train harder when we get back to the swords.”

“Deal,” Mobei-Jun said, grinning broadly. “But if you win, I will do your chores for an entire week. Think of it as an incentive.”

“Chores?” Luo Binghe rolled his eyes again, but he could not suppress a genuine smile. “You are on.”

With that, they moved into the back garden, the afternoon sun casting a warm, golden glow over the verdant expanse.

# Chapter 6: Chapter 6

Luo Binghe found it surprisingly easy to break into Shen Qingqiu's dream realm. The siphoned magic humming in his chest answered his desperate panic perfectly. Suddenly, the cozy back garden dissolved entirely. The vibrant colors of a festival danced around him as he sprinted through a bustling demon city, the air thick with laughter and the rich scent of sweet treats. His heart raced as he focused his eyes on the beautifully illuminated black temple at the center of it all, knowing that the Emperor of Darkness awaited him within.

With determination fueling his frantic steps, Luo Binghe leaped up the temple's grand staircase, taking six steps at a time, until he burst right through the ornate doors. He skidded to an abrupt halt, taking in the unexpected scene before him. Shen Qingqiu reclined languidly on a luxurious couch, looking like an absolute image of serenity. Meanwhile, Shang Qinghua somehow managed to balance precariously on the very back of the cushions, looking both highly amused and slightly alarmed.

The stark juxtaposition of their relaxed demeanor against the absolute urgency of his own situation sent a heavy chill down Luo Binghe's spine. He could feel the cold aura naturally radiating from the Ice King already, a looming reminder of the gravity of his predicament. Shaking off the brief, short-circuiting distraction of seeing his ultimate OTP interacting in real life, he forced his brain to focus.

"I am truly sorry to interrupt," Luo Binghe said, his voice breathless, rushed, and trembling. "But I need your help, my Emperor. I've hurt my best friend—he is my brother in all but blood—and I wasn't prepared for how powerful your magic is. He's in immense pain from our wrestling match, and I'm unsure of how to alleviate it, especially since we are trying to keep a low profile."

Shen Qingqiu's eyes flickered open, his expression shifting instantly from lazy amusement to serious concern. "Luo Binghe," he said softly, his tone becoming immediately attentive. "What happened?"

"Please," Luo Binghe implored, the crushing weight of Mobei-Jun's suffering pressing heavily on his chest. "You almost lost your own strength recently during that accidental summoning on the altar. You're in this exact predicament because your power was ripped away. Mobei-Jun would do absolutely anything for me, and I need to return that kindness to him right now."

Tears slipped from Luo Binghe's eyes, a wave of frustration and desperation bubbling to the surface as he watched the emperor. He knew it was a terrible, reckless plan, but he stood up, deliberately drawing Shen Qingqiu's dark demonic energy around his hands just like he had during the accident in the garden. Red and black sparks crackled wildly across his knuckles. "It takes me no effort at all to do this, and I accidentally slammed my friend straight into a wall. Please, tell me what I can do to fix it."

Shang Qinghua glanced toward Shen Qingqiu, who seemed to be genuinely contemplating the urgent request. The former Ice King inwardly berated himself; he still didn't fully understand how a random human teenager had managed to intercept the emperor's ritual and siphon away half of his master's supreme shadow core, leaving Shen Qingqiu so weak. However, he knew they had to keep moving forward. He jumped down from the back of the couch, landing gracefully in front of the crying teenager, attempting to project the confidence of the higher demon he was supposed to be.

Placing a steady hand on Luo Binghe's waist while using his other hand to wipe away the tears with gentle, clawed fingers, Shang Qinghua's voice turned entirely silky. "Oh, sweet one, don't cry… I have a direct solution for you. Let me possess your physical body. I'll take care of your friend's injuries while you and Shen Qingqiu wait safely here in the dream realm."

Luo Binghe blinked at Shang Qinghua, feeling the distinct chill of his icy touch against his skin. He couldn't believe this was how Mobei-Jun actually saw his own character: small, dramatic, and utterly infuriating. With a deep scowl, Luo Binghe pushed the Ice King away. "And let you do creepy shit with my body? No way. Mobei-Jun would be in even greater danger with you messing around with my hands."

Desperation driving him completely, Luo Binghe rushed straight to the couch, dropping heavily to his knees and clutching Shen Qingqiu's legs shamelessly. He gazed up into the emperor's eyes, searching for a glimmer of willingness to help. "You have to help me. I can learn control, just please."

Shang Qinghua recoiled slightly at Luo Binghe's harsh rejection, a sudden pang of guilt and frustration welling up in his chest. He had only meant to offer a genuine shortcut, but perhaps he had overstepped. He shot a quick glance at Shen Qingqiu, who was now looking down at the kneeling youth, the teenager's raw desperation palpable throughout the temple.

Shen Qingqiu sighed softly, understanding the profound depth of Luo Binghe's plea. His heart ached for the boy who was willing to do absolutely anything to save his brother. Gently, he reached down and placed a reassuring hand on Luo Binghe's head, his touch comforting and surprisingly warm.

"Luo Binghe," Shen Qingqiu began, his voice calm and steady. "Unfortunately, possession by Shang Qinghua is the best option for you right now."

Luo Binghe tried to pull back, horror etched across his face, but Shen Qingqiu began to massage his scalp. The gentle, rhythmic pressure immediately calmed the teen's ragged breathing, causing him to lean more solidly against Shen Qingqiu's legs. The emperor's voice filled with absolute sincerity.

"I truly understand your need to help your friend. But you need time to learn control over your new power, and being around him will be a severe liability until then. Stay here with me, and I will train you. Meanwhile, Shang Qinghua can at the very least provide your friend with pain-numbing tea. He has had to use it heavily himself over the last few weeks to cope with the physical strain of our situation. I also trust him to be true to his word. He will not hurt your friend if I ask him not to."

Shen Qingqiu's logical words, combined with his soothing touch, successfully eased the painful tension in Luo Binghe's body. Though deeply reluctant, Luo Binghe began to see the wisdom in the arrangement.

Shen Qingqiu started to gently play with Luo Binghe's curls, thinking critically about the steps forward. His thoughts were abruptly interrupted when Shang Qinghua sat down right beside him on the cushions. Shang Qinghua made highly exaggerated, teasing eyebrow wiggles, clearly amused by how quickly the stoic emperor had grown fond of this human teen.

Shen Qingqiu's hands jumped back from Luo Binghe's hair in a sudden flash of embarrassment, his face returning to a calm demeanor after scowling briefly at his companion.

"Luo Binghe," the emperor began again, his tone steady and reassuring. "You will need to center yourself and willingly trust Shang Qinghua to take over your body while you stay here with your Shizun. He may have been clumsy, but Shang Qinghua was merely trying to make you believe in him to allow the connection to take place. Can you trust in me enough to let him go?"

Luo Binghe looked up at Shen Qingqiu, his amber eyes searching for final reassurance. The unyielding sincerity in Shen Qingqiu's gaze had completely melted his remaining doubts. He took a deep breath, his resolve hardening.

"Yes, Shizun," Luo Binghe replied, his voice filled with determination. "I trust you. I will do as you say."

Shen Qingqiu nodded, a small, proud smile playing on his lips. "Good. Now, let's prepare. This will require your utmost focus."

Shen Qingqiu placed a firm hand on Shang Qinghua's leg, looking at his friend with absolute seriousness. "Promise me not to play games. Heal his friend fully, then return to us immediately. I trust you, my beloved brother."

Receiving Shang Qinghua's solemn nod and murmured consent, Shen Qingqiu began to guide Luo Binghe through the mental release. Shang Qinghua stepped closer, pressing two fingers to the youth's forehead. A blinding wave of cold light swallowed Luo Binghe's vision, and he went limp, falling safely against the couch as Shen Qingqiu caught him.

Far away, back in the cabin garden, Luo Binghe's physical eyes snapped open. Shang Qinghua took a deep breath, testing his temporary hands, and looked down at the injured blacksmith on the grass. Using Luo Binghe's voice, the king spoke softly into the waking world:

"Mobei-Jun, please don't panic. Your Luo Binghe came to get help."

# Chapter 7: Chap 7

Shang Qinghua blinked awake, the disorienting sensation of occupying Luo Binghe's body washing over him. He winced, feeling the hard floor beneath him, and slowly uncurled to rub his eyes. As he took in his surroundings, he realized that the teenager from Shen Qingqiu's dream realm was much older and larger than he remembered. His gaze drifted downward, and he did a sudden double-take. The body he now inhabited was undeniably impressive—a total beefcake, and absolutely his type.

He let out an exasperated huf, silently cursing Shen Qingqiu for claiming this new meat before he had even had a chance to appreciate it in person.

"Get in bed and try again in the morning. I'm okay," a weak voice called out, breaking through his thoughts.

Shang Qinghua's brain completely short-circuited as he turned toward the source. A stunning man with strong, defined features was looking back at him questioningly, his bare skin marred by a multitude of deep bruises. Shang Qinghua's mind raced, cataloging every single inch of exposed skin in a mix of sudden admiration and concern. Vaguely, he recalled his mission to help Luo Binghe's friend, Mobei-Jun. This had to be him.

Before he could process the situation further, Mobei-Jun reached out and thumped him lightly on the head, throwing him a disapproving look. Panic surged through Shang Qinghua. What was that supposed to mean? He felt a sudden flush creep up his cheeks, terrifyingly aware that the blood was rushing to other parts of Luo Binghe's borrowed body.

In a burst of frantic energy, Shang Qinghua jumped to his feet, his voice pitching much higher than intended. "Shizun taught me how to make pain relief tea! Let me brew that for you—uh, excuse me… sir!" He awkwardly bowed, assuming this majestic Mobei-Jun was of noble status, before stumbling over his own feet in his rush to the kitchen.

*Smooth,* he thought to himself, profoundly grateful that his bro was not around to witness such a mortifying display.

Hurrying into the kitchen, his mind raced with how to accurately mimic Luo Binghe. He had to keep up the façade long enough to finish the tea, but he couldn't shake the persistent feeling that Mobei-Jun was watching his every move. The last thing he wanted was to blow his cover immediately. He fumbled with the ingredients, trying to recall the exact recipe Shen Qingqiu had shared. His hands shook slightly as he measured the herbs, the memory of Mobei-Jun's piercing gaze lingering heavily in his mind. What if the man figured out he was an impostor?

Meanwhile, Mobei-Jun had known Luo Binghe long enough to recognize when something was amiss. The usually confident, collected young man was suddenly floundering around the kitchen—clumsy and overly eager. It set off immediate alarm bells. Mobei-Jun narrowed his eyes, trying to gauge the situation. Moving carefully, he sat up, grimacing as a sharp pain

lanced through his middle, leaving an ache that felt like a gaping hole. Ignoring the discomfort in his back, he focused entirely on the scene.

Luo Binghe was moving about, making a performative show of familiarity, yet his hunched shoulders betrayed deep-seated anxiety. Mobei-Jun knew his own characters perfectly. Shang Qinghua—his absolute favorite despite not being the novel's main character—was unmistakable in this exact moment. A sudden warmth blossomed in his chest as the realization dawned.

“Shang Qinghua, are you here to kill me? That would be quite shortsighted.”

Shang Qinghua nearly dropped the pot of tea in pure shock. How had this stranger figured him out so quickly? He struggled to keep his voice steady, but to his dismay, it came out as an uncharacteristic whine. “What? Why would the King of the North be here healing you? Maybe you hit your head. Just wait for me to finish the tea!”

Mobei-Jun fought back laughter at the frantic movements. The former ice king was trying so hard to maintain his royal composure, yet his hands trembled as he arranged a beautiful tray for the beverages. Mobei-Jun suddenly coughed, blood forcing its way up his throat with a painful choke. He spoke again, his voice weak but insistent. “Come on… you’ll feel better if you accept the truth. You possessed Luo Binghe to get revenge for Shen Qingqiu’s magic, didn’t you? You’re planning to poison me. Quite clever, little ice king.”

Shang Qinghua's eyes widened, the color draining from his face as he froze, the tray trembling precariously in his hands. “You… you don’t understand!” he stammered, struggling to regain his bearings. “I am not here to harm you! I—”

Mobei-Jun, moving with surprising agility for someone recently slammed into a wall, swiftly took the tray from Shang Qinghua's hands and placed it beside the bed. The brief effort thoroughly drained him. He collapsed back onto the mattress, letting out a soft groan of pain as his body sank into the bedding. With his face pressed into the pillow, he whispered, “Let Luo Binghe go. It’s cruel to take advantage of his kind nature. I assume he is with Shen Qingqiu now, absolutely enraptured.”

Shang Qinghua knelt beside the bed, placing a hand on Mobei-Jun’s arm. The warmth radiated against his palm, stirring an inexplicable urge to draw closer. He poked the arm with Luo Binghe’s sharp nail, noting the tautness of the muscle—there was no illusion or glamour at play here.

“He wanted me to help you,” Shang Qinghua said slowly, his tone turning measured. “Bro is training him even as I possess this body… It would be easier if we knew exactly where you came from, but… I don't intend to kill either of you until we understand what has happened.”

Mobei-Jun turned his head, meeting the stranger’s eyes looking back at him from his best friend’s face. He searched for the truth, causing a shiver of self-consciousness to ripple through Shang Qinghua. The king reminded himself that he was the Ice Demon King, feared for his intelligence and martial prowess. He did not need to fear this man’s icy gaze.

Adopting a façade of confidence, Shang Qinghua treated this like a high-stakes spy mission where he had to stay perfectly in character—regal and commanding, much like Shen Qingqiu. Gathering his resolve, he gently rolled Mobei-Jun onto his back, using Luo Binghe's surprising physical strength to support the movement. He settled beside him on the mattress, propping the injured man securely against his shoulder before offering the cup.

"You will feel better," he urged. "Your qi is very weak. You need to recover with sleep, and then I can walk you through the rest of your healing tomorrow."

With a soft sigh, Shang Qinghua took a quick sip of the liquid first, glancing down at Mobei-Jun, whose head now rested against him. "If it's poisonous, I just killed Luo Binghe," he muttered with a hint of dry humor, trying to lighten the heavy atmosphere.

"I will haunt you if so, my little king." Mobei-Jun downed the tea at last. It felt entirely too strange to be lying against his best friend's form. He shifted to lay his head back on the pillow, but he took Shang Qinghua's hand tightly in his own, draping his legs diagonally across the king's.

Mobei-Jun closed his eyes, easily imagining that instead of Luo Binghe's muscular frame, it was the real Shang Qinghua—dressed in his winter furs, his delicate features twisted in worry as he tried to find a way to make this situation benefit him. Mobei-Jun spoke in a semi-serious tone, "If this little king moves too much in my sleep, I'll wake up and bite you. Don't get any nasty ideas about looking out the windows."

Before he could think better of it, Shang Qinghua blurted out, "To me, a bite from you would feel like a reward, my lord."

The words slipped from his mouth, and his face flushed with intense embarrassment almost instantly. Instinctively, he tried to pull his hand away, but Mobei-Jun's grip tightened, locking him firmly in place. The heat radiating from Mobei-Jun's body enveloped him entirely, igniting a sudden warmth that felt both exhilarating and completely overwhelming.

After a long, silent moment, Shang Qinghua finally found his voice again. "I am sorry, my lord… I did not mean to make such a tasteless joke."

"Don't worry about it," Mobei-Jun replied, his tone surprisingly light. "I am not a lord of anything."

He leaned in closer, deliberately pressing his teeth lightly against Shang Qinghua's shoulder in a teasing, physical warning. "Just be good. Stay still. You will only cause me more pain if you squirm too much."

As Mobei-Jun's breath warmed against his skin, Shang Qinghua could not help but experience a strange mix of comfort and sheer excitement. The absolute proximity was thoroughly intoxicating. He secretly reveled in the way Mobei-Jun's intense body heat contrasted so sharply with his own natural ice demon demeanor.

"I will do my best," Shang Qinghua promised, his voice dropping to a whisper. "But it is incredibly hard not to move when you are so… distracting."

Mobei-Jun let out a soft chuckle. The deep vibration rattled against Shang Qinghua’s shoulder, sending a sudden thrill straight down his spine. “Then focus entirely on staying still, my little king. I promise it will be worth it.”

In that exact moment, Shang Qinghua realized that Mobei-Jun's immense warmth was far more than just a physical sensation. It acted like a soothing balm, softening the rigid edges of his own frozen heart and drawing him closer to this human weapon cultivator in ways he had never anticipated.

As he finally relaxed into the hold, Shang Qinghua sent a silent, fervent prayer to the system gods, hoping that Shen Qingqiu would take his sweet time getting their location coordinates during the dream training sessions. After all, there was a seemingly delicious, highly willing treat lying right here in bed with him.

# Chapter 8: Chapter 8

Luo Binghe felt an overwhelming fatigue wash over him—an unfair burden to carry even within the confines of a dream. He did not want to appear weak before Shen Qingqiu, yet here he sat at his instructor's feet once more. Although he had successfully managed to transform his dream body into its true adult form, Shizun had advised that remaining in his five-year-old appearance would consume far less energy.

There were countless questions Luo Binghe longed to ask, but one in particular continuously gnawed at him. Why did the typically stoic Mobei-Jun care so deeply about his fate that he would write this tragic narrative? Shen Qingqiu, being a creation born of Mobei-Jun's mind, might hold the answers he sought.

Luo Binghe looked up, his voice uncharacteristically uncertain. "I have a personal question you don't need to answer… Shizun, why was Shang Qinghua worth the loss of your powers? You are much more intelligent and powerful than him. He is only the King of the North because his clan is strong. He's a figurehead, and he knows it."

Shen Qingqiu bristled at the forwardness. Despite his growing fondness for this young man's smile and voice, the emperor had almost lost the person closest to him. He covered his face with his fan, concealing his emotions, and spoke in a measured tone. "You are mistaken about the King. To me, Shang Qinghua's value is not in what he does. He allows me to be myself—to speak my mind freely without judgment. Calling him my beloved brother would be a disservice."

He paused, his eyes softening as he continued. "Yes, he gets on my nerves and possesses many faults, but I would not want to live in a world without him. He does far more than people realize. His loss would be a true tragedy, not just for me, but for everyone."

Shen Qingqiu's words hung heavily in the air, laden with a depth of feeling Luo Binghe had not anticipated. He realized the bond between the emperor and the former king was far more profound than he had understood. It wasn't about raw power or political status; it was about an irreplaceable connection.

Luo Binghe nodded slowly, absorbing the gravity of the statement. "I see, Shizun. Thank you for sharing that with me." He looked down at his shoes, the next inquiry spilling out before he could contain it, bouncing loudly inside his skull. "Are you romantically involved with him, Shizun?"

Shen Qingqiu's laugh was light and genuine—a rare sound that momentarily eased the tension. He moved forward on the couch, gently taking a few strands of Luo Binghe's curly hair into his hands and deftly beginning to braid them. Luo Binghe's physical discomfort was palpable, and Shen Qingqiu's actions were meant to soothe him, distracting the youth from his evident anxiety.

However, before the emperor could formulate a verbal response, a familiar chime resonated in his mind, freezing the world around them.

**[Self-Saving System - My Emperor, My Heart: Make a definitive choice. Tell Luo Binghe the truth (Results: +50 romance pts, location of Luo Binghe) or Give an official answer to protect your walls (Results: +20 character depth, +100 oblivious hero).]**

Shen Qingqiu let out a quiet sigh. The System possessed an uncanny knack for intervening at the most inconvenient moments. He glanced down at Luo Binghe, whose earnest eyes were filled with a mix of curiosity and apprehension. The boy deserved an answer, but how much was he ready to absorb?

Contemplating the choices, Shen Qingqiu resolved to be entirely honest. He did not particularly care if the response led to romance; his primary concern was regaining his powers to maintain balance in the world. He felt no personal fear—after all, he had never truly loved anyone in that manner. Luo Binghe could continue to look at him with those infatuated eyes for as long as he liked.

Shen Qingqiu smiled gently, absentmindedly playing with the curls to ground himself. “Definitely not. While my connection with him is the strongest I’ve ever experienced, I have no desire for anything romantic. Shang Qinghua is rather… eccentric. He often walks around naked and spends his free time drawing or writing about men with men. He views relationships as mere distractions from his responsibilities, and that is not who I am. Plus, his total lack of a filter can be amusing, but it also means he constantly puts his foot in his mouth—definitely not something I am willing to tolerate. I’ve never had a romantic relationship, and I suspect I never will.”

Luo Binghe listened intently, his expression a blend of relief and confusion. The way Shen Qingqiu’s fingers brushed through his hair eased the remaining tension, yet it also awakened a deeper, desperate longing within him.

"Are you saying... you don't love him?" Luo Binghe asked quietly, his voice trembling slightly. "But you mentioned your connection is strong. I thought... maybe..."

A pang of guilt pierced through Shen Qingqiu. He could see the flicker of hope in the youth's eyes, and it disarmed him. "It is complicated," he replied, choosing his words with care. "Strong bonds do not always equate to romantic love. Sometimes, they manifest as deep friendships built on trust and shared experiences. Don’t you have that exact kind of connection with your friend—the one Shang Qinghua is helping right now?”

Luo Binghe hesitated, his brow furrowing. "I suppose," he murmured, his voice softening. "But... it feels entirely different when it is you. I want to understand."

Shen Qingqiu gently brushed his fingers over the furrow in Luo Binghe’s forehead, a wistful smile gracing his lips as he recognized the depth behind the words. "We’ve never truly met in the physical world," he said softly. "You've heard of me through the peaks, but our encounters have been strictly limited to these training sessions. It may feel like weeks have passed here, but in reality, we’ve only been in this realm for a few hours. You will understand me better when we are face-to-face…”

Leaning closer, Shen Qingqiu lowered his voice to a calm whisper, his lips nearly brushing against Luo Binghe’s ear. “I will find you and reclaim my power. If you want that to happen

sooner, just let Shizun know where you are."

Luo Binghe's breath hitched, the warmth of Shen Qingqiu's presence enveloping him completely. The tender touch on his forehead and the hushed words sent shivers down his spine, stirring a whirlwind of emotions he struggled to define.

Just then, Shang Qinghua swaggered into the room, looking thoroughly exhausted. "Mobei-Jun is healed; he was not an easy patient. You should have mentioned he was part bull," he quipped. Stopping mid-sentence, he noticed the intense closeness between the two. His eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Do I need to give you two some privacy?"

Shen Qingqiu rolled his eyes, immediately moving away from Luo Binghe. He rose to his feet and glided over to Shang Qinghua, holding onto his hands in a formal greeting.

Watching them, Luo Binghe felt the green monster of jealousy flare up, making the blood bubble in his veins. Shen Qingqiu and Shang Qinghua began conversing in a rapid, higher demon dialect that Luo Binghe could not comprehend.

Turning back around, Shen Qingqiu looked at Luo Binghe again. His face had returned to a cold mask, showing no sign of the tenderness he had displayed while braiding the youth's hair. His voice was smooth and silky. "You can return to your body now. Do you wish to tell me where you and Mobei-Jun are hiding? We will find you eventually. The longer you delay, the more chaos will befall both demons and humans."

Luo Binghe's heart raced, the previous warmth replaced by a sharp chill of uncertainty. Watching them speak in a language that felt foreign and distant, the cadence smooth yet filled with an undertone of urgency, he felt like an absolute outsider in a world where he desperately wanted to belong.

When Shen Qingqiu turned back to him, the cold mask he wore stood in stark contrast to the intimacy they had just shared. The silky tone of his voice sent a sharp shiver down Luo Binghe's spine, but it also ignited a sudden fire of determination. He could not let this moment of connection slip away.

"Shizun, I…" Luo Binghe started, his voice trembling slightly as he struggled to steady himself. Mobei-Jun would definitely tell him to keep his mouth shut, lecturing him that he trusted strangers too easily. But the longing to remain close to his Shizun was overpowering. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes. "I am not entirely sure of our exact coordinates... I think it is the Peak of Weapons, but we are outside the main compound. We aren't part of their sect—just newcomers trying to forge weapons of power."

As Luo Binghe opened his eyes, a shock coursed through him. He felt Shang Qinghua's mental presence a split second before he saw him. The former ice king suddenly lunged forward and hugged him tightly, a mischievous grin plastered across his face as he playfully planted loud kisses on both of Luo Binghe's cheeks. "Perfect! We will see you soon. Shen Qingqiu, you really chose a great—"

Shen Qingqiu growled fiercely, moving with lightning speed to seize the back of Shang Qinghua's robes and hurl him away with all his strength. His intense gaze remained locked

strictly on Luo Binghe's face. "Thank you. Don't get into too much trouble before we find you. Now go."

Shang Qinghua stumbled backward, laughter bubbling up from his throat, though even he could sense the heavily charged atmosphere. "Alright, alright! I will behave," he called out, raising his hands in mock surrender as he regained his footing. The playful glint in his eyes lingered, yet he kept his distance, acutely aware of the protective aura emanating from the emperor.

Luo Binghe gazed deeply into Shen Qingqiu's eyes, his heart aching with unspoken words. He longed to express how profoundly grateful he was to have been brought into this world, to share these fleeting moments with the beautiful Emperor. If this were truly to be their last encounter, he felt as though his ultimate dream had already come true. He had spent what felt like days wrapped in the warmth of Shen Qingqiu's presence, and it filled him with an overwhelming sense of joy.

Gathering the magical threads that connected him back to his physical form—now entirely free from Shang Qinghua's paralyzing possession—Luo Binghe paused for a final moment. With a serious expression, he said, "Shizun, you are more than I ever imagined."

With those heartfelt words, he pulled his consciousness back into his body, instantly feeling the familiar warmth and comfort of the cabin bed. Propping himself up on one elbow, he blinked awake to notice Mobei-Jun standing nearby. His best friend had two massive bags sitting at his feet, packed tight with what looked like heavy traveling gear.

"I am glad to see you are feeling better, Mobei-Jun," Luo Binghe said, a distinct hint of relief in his voice. "But why do you have the entire world stuffed into those bags?"

"You told him. Let's go," Mobei-Jun replied flatly, tossing a set of travel clothes toward his friend without wasting a single moment.

The author was acutely aware that their current position was no longer safe. During the sleepless night spent holding onto the body of his possessed best friend, Mobei-Jun had successfully devised a strategy. After all, he was the creator of this universe, and he had just learned that throwing random ideas against the annoying, ever-watchful System could actually open up brand-new paths for them to survive.

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# Chapter 9: Chap 9

**[Self-Saving System: WARNING! -4000 OOC. Resisting the plot will have severe consequences. 600 points remaining.]**

Mobei-Jun remained entirely resolute: Shen Qingqiu and Shang Qinghua would have to step over his dead body before they laid a single finger on Luo Binghe. He was determined to do everything in his power to keep his friend safe, ensuring a life completely free from danger. There was absolutely no room for negotiation. As the author, Mobei-Jun was painfully aware that no cultivation magic could purge the siphoned demonic energy from Luo Binghe without actively jeopardizing his life. He did not care if his resistance meant hurting his own main characters. He recognized that their greatest vulnerability lay in their intense bond with one another, and he would exploit it if necessary.

Mobei-Jun's own character development in this universe revolved around forging and imbuing, leaving his raw cultivation level frustratingly low—especially after recovering from Luo Binghe's accidental blast. Still, he understood how to leverage their physical surroundings. That was why they were currently drenched in sweat inside the secret forging room deep within the mountain, where a boiling spring provided a natural source of suffocating heat. Steam enveloped the chamber, and a massive forge stood against the far wall, burning bright. Fortunately, because this section of the peak was deserted, they did not have to worry about innocent cultivators stumbling into the traps they had set for the pursuing demons.

Mobei-Jun had not anticipated the degree to which both Luo Binghe and the System would fight this plan. He glanced at his best friend, who sat trapped inside a silver circle of a holding ward. The barrier's range was narrow, forcing Luo Binghe to sit directly on the stone floor. His outer robe hung completely open because of the intense heat, revealing his muscular torso nicely. Mobei-Jun privately hoped the display would act as a massive distraction for the perverted former ice king.

Catching Mobei-Jun's eye, the curly-haired temporary demon scowled.

"What you're doing is definitely overkill. I could be out there right now, ready to face Shizun and the Twink King! I've spent so much time with Shizun in the dreamscape, and I've read your novels multiple times…" Luo Binghe trailed off, practically hearing Mobei-Jun's stubborn, unspoken responses: *Definitely not* and *Over my dead body.*

Luo Binghe had initially put up a fight against the lockdown, but Mobei-Jun's logic was undeniable. Shen Qingqiu and Shang Qinghua were the ultimate main characters of this universe, and reality bent to benefit them. Now that Mobei-Jun was no longer actively writing their story, they could not take the chance that the two demonic royals would keep their word to a pair of low-level background cultivators.

With a heavy sigh, Luo Binghe worried about how Shizun would react to the obstacles blocking the inner chamber. He and Mobei-Jun had utilized his stolen demonic abilities to lay

a myriad of lethal traps along the tunnels. Although Mobei-Jun assured him that Shen Qingqiu still possessed absolute plot armor even as a human, Luo Binghe could not shake his deep anxiety.

He let out another breath, glancing up at his friend's broad back, a swirl of jealousy and concern lacing his tone. "What's our actual plan once we get out of here?"

"Stay clear of Shen Qingqiu and Shang Qinghua. Just live a life of fairness," Mobei-Jun replied quickly, his gaze darting to the flashing red system notifications. They were meant to be mere side characters. But with Luo Binghe's life constantly on the line due to the siphoned magic, Mobei-Jun knew his friend would always be a target near the protagonists. He would gladly endure any punishment from the System if it meant prolonging Luo Binghe's life.

Luo Binghe closed his eyes, imagining Shen Qingqiu's quiet, mocking chuckle at the memory of him tripping over his own feet in the dream palace. He spoke slowly, choosing his words with care. "This is a chance to live a life that is more exciting and meaningful than anything we could have ever experienced back on Earth. Shouldn't we embrace it to the fullest, right at the center of the action?"

He watched Mobei-Jun move away to check the fire traps again, ensuring they would incinerate Shang Qinghua if the king got too close. Luo Binghe knew he would not get a verbal answer. His best friend was highly intelligent, but incredibly stubborn and fiercely protective.

"Mobei-Jun, I thought my life would be completely over in a couple of weeks," Luo Binghe said softly. "I was terrified to go to sleep, worried it might be the last time I'd ever close my eyes. I feared I'd lose the ability to swallow and end up in full-time hospital care. I was so scared I'd die regretting my life. Back home, we barely left the city. I never even got to see my childhood home again. The body you created for me here is beautiful, happy, and healthy. I want to live a life that I won't mind eventually leaving behind."

Mobei-Jun's shoulders slumped at the end of the heartfelt speech. Deep down, he understood that Luo Binghe yearned for a better existence—one filled with genuine joy, adventure, and the freedom to explore. Mobei-Jun had witnessed firsthand the disdain Luo Binghe held for the fearful hermit his friend had become in the real world—a prisoner of spiraling anxiety that had nudged Mobei-Jun perilously close to agoraphobia. The weight of selfishness settled heavily in his chest. Was he truly willing to cage Luo Binghe just to keep him safe by his side, without considering his actual desires?

Bittersweet pangs of heartbreak coursed through him. Though his past life had been fraught with severe challenges, Mobei-Jun would not have traded it for anything because he had known the warmth of a true friend who genuinely wanted him around. Yet the stark truth loomed over him: Luo Binghe was a vibrant soul who deserved to embrace life fully, not be tethered to Mobei-Jun's deep-seated fears.

Mobei-Jun's thoughts darkened, spiraling into familiar depths, when the sudden *crack* of a defensive trap jolted him back to the present. The unmistakable sound of Shang Qinghua and Shen Qingqiu stumbling into his carefully laid minefield pulled him instantly from his reverie.

Crouched within the protective silver dome, Luo Binghe felt a restless energy coursing through his veins, ready to spring into action. Mobei-Jun busied himself at the forge, aggressively stoking the flames and filling the room with thick, swirling steam that cloaked them both in an intimate haze. The rising heat blurred the edges of Luo Binghe's vision, but he could sense the unmistakable presence of Shen Qingqiu drawing nearer. The stolen magic within his chest boiled to the surface, manifesting as vibrant red horns and sleek scales bursting forth from his skin, accompanied by a mouth now lined with dangerously sharpened teeth.

In the midst of the building tension, Luo Binghe continued his impassioned monologue, spurred on by the absence of Mobei-Jun's usual interruptions to keep quiet.

"For gods' sake, I've never found anyone to love fully," he confessed, the raw weight of his words hanging in the steam. "It never mattered who they were—how beautiful or well-connected—they always bored me so quickly. What I actually want is to know what it's like to cook for someone every day, to see their face light up when they wake in the morning. But I don't think I can ever have that if we are constantly on the run from the Emperor of Darkness and the Demon Ice King of the North."

Luo Binghe's voice trembled with a mix of longing and intense frustration, the inner fire igniting as fiercely as the flames in the forge. He craved warmth and real connection, yet the threat looming right outside the door cast a long shadow over those dreams.

Mobei-Jun felt the familiar grip of paranoia tightening around his chest like a vise. Inwardly, he fought against the suffocating hold; he could not afford to be his own enemy right now. He had sworn to protect Luo Binghe, and he would see that promise fulfilled, no matter what the main characters or the System threw at him.

The heavy stone doors to the inner chamber whooshed open, thick steam billowing out to swirl around the two figures framing the doorway. One of them let out a sudden scream of frustration and pain, cutting straight through the tense atmosphere. The Emperor of Darkness, Shen Qingqiu, stepped inside, effortlessly exuding an aura of regal menace. Although he currently lacked the supreme demonic energy that typically roiled around his frame, his expression remained so lethal that Mobei-Jun half-wondered if the emperor could unleash lightning with a mere glare.

Following closely behind him was Shang Qinghua. The former Ice King's features were twisted in a fierce snarl as he stumbled into the chamber, clearly injured and bleeding from the fire traps Mobei-Jun had meticulously hidden along the tunnels.

Mobei-Jun stood his ground, his voice unwavering as he addressed the intruders. "Luo Binghe is not a toy for you to manipulate, Emperor. I will not allow you to harm him. Take two more steps, and you will trigger an explosion that will bring this entire mountain chamber down on our heads."

"I believe you have thoroughly misunderstood the situation, Mobei-jun, friend of Luo Binghe," Shen Qingqiu said, his voice laced with absolute, icy contempt. "I do not think Luo Binghe possesses my magic by any intentional action of his own. The boy is innocent. However, the balance of this world must be maintained. He needs to return to the palace at

my side until I can safely reclaim my core. You, on the other hand, are highly expendable—especially after your pathetic attempts to kill me and Shang Qinghua."

Shen Qingqiu's rage surged as he cast a furious glance at the small silver dome where his disciple was trapped, a palpable longing emanating from him through their stolen bond. The intensity of that connection felt even stronger in person. "Nothing you do will stop me. I don't care if Luo Binghe will miss you when you are gone."

As Mobei-Jun tightened his grip on his massive, hammer-like sword, the shadows of additional foes seemed to loom in his peripheral vision, their indistinct forms adding to the menace. Severe anxiety clawed at his insides, quickening his breathing and clouding his thoughts. In that exact moment, the cautious strategy he had devised completely evaporated, utterly overwhelmed by his primal instinct to protect his friend. The magic he had been channeling to shield Luo Binghe suddenly surged uncontrollably, erupting outward in a powerful gust of wind that swept through the cave, stunning everyone momentarily—everyone except Mobei-Jun, whose roaring adrenaline drowned out all fear.

With a primal scream that reverberated off the cavern walls like a beast unleashed, Mobei-Jun abandoned the trigger mechanism for the fireballs and charged straight at Shen Qingqiu, raw determination fueling each frantic step.

Shang Qinghua, still reeling from the impact of the defensive mines, gasped as he felt the energy shift in the atmosphere. He responded instinctively, summoning his remaining ice powers to transform the cave floor into a slick, glistening surface. With a swift motion, he glided forward, using the momentum to bring his weapon crashing down toward the trigger mechanism. He wasn't trying to strike Mobei-Jun; he aimed to redirect the chaos, hoping to buy time for his emperor.

Mobei-Jun, however, was entirely relentless. As his sword sliced through the air with lethal precision, Shang Qinghua seized the opportunity presented by the exposed skin on the blacksmith's arms, deftly maneuvering around the swing. He desperately needed to distract the man and slow him down, his mind racing for a viable plan.

"Stop! You don't need to do this!" Shang Qinghua shouted, his voice slicing through the din. "We can work this out!"

But Mobei-Jun's eyes were wild—a storm of fury and desperation locked solely onto Shen Qingqiu. The words fell into the abyss, completely unheard and unheeded.

In a moment of reckless determination, Shang Qinghua forced his body to wrap tightly around Mobei-Jun from behind, ducking his head into the human's overly hot shoulder. It was a strange comfort amidst the tumult—a desperate attempt to anchor himself to something solid as the tension crackled. Supposing the gods had finally answered his secret wish to climb Mobei-Jun like a tree, the king drew deep from the icy reservoir remaining within his soul.

He unleashed a massive surge of frost directly against Mobei-Jun's skin, aiming to immobilize him and end the charge. The heavy sweat Mobei-Jun had accumulated in the sweltering confines of the forge room only accelerated the freezing process. To Shang

Qinghua's astonishment, the heat radiating from the human's body only fueled the cold energy—an unexpected tactical advantage. He felt Mobei-Jun's fierce resistance wane as the thick frost began to cling to his limbs, slowly sapping his strength.

Then, with an alarming suddenness, Mobei-Jun's massive body slumped heavily against the stone floor. Despite the urgency of their predicament, Shang Qinghua felt a sharp pang of sympathy, wincing for the man whose fervor had turned to absolute vulnerability in an instant.

Finding himself pressed flush against Mobei-Jun’s broad chest, Shang Qinghua couldn't help himself. The gesture felt strangely intimate—a fleeting connection amid the absolute ruin of the forge. He inhaled the scent of sweat and determination, a heady mix that made his heart race. Unable to suppress a small laugh, he quipped softly, “We meet again. Let’s cool down, Mobei-Jun.”

But beneath the levity, the stakes had never been higher. He could feel Mobei-Jun's rapid heartbeat beneath his cheek, a reminder that while the fight had paused, the war was still actively raging around them.

As Mobei-Jun lay demobilized beneath Shang Qinghua, the scene shifted dramatically. Shen Qingqiu skidded to a halt, his breath catching as he locked eyes with the trapped youth. His heart raced, pounding against his ribcage like a caged bird desperate for freedom.

“Why are you fighting me?” the emperor demanded, incredulity coloring his tone. “You told me exactly where you were! Don’t you want me here? You cannot control my power on your own!”

Luo Binghe's gaze drifted from his frozen friend to Shen Qingqiu, a storm of complex emotions swirling within his chest. He technically held the upper hand with his stolen magic, but the sight of Mobei-Jun's pained, hazy gaze tugged violently at his conscience. It reminded him of the carefree days they had shared back on Earth, when Mobei-Jun was just a man, not a figure entwined in destiny's cruel machinations. The memory of his friend needing frequent breaks during their real-world outings flickered through his mind—a bittersweet reminder that even the strongest among them had limits.

A crushing weight of guilt settled heavily in Luo Binghe's heart, anchoring him in place. “I… I am not fighting you. I am protecting Mobei-Jun,” he said, his voice wavering slightly as his red horns and scales faintly pulsed. “He believes going with you is an automatic death sentence… I… I will go with you willingly. But only if you promise me right now. Mobei-Jun will not be harmed. He only means well.”

As he spoke, Mobei-Jun's eyes fluttered shut, hot tears escaping the corners of his eyelids. He had tried so hard to do the right thing—to carve a safe path through the chaos for his dying brother—but now he felt entirely lost. The immense weight of his failure pressed down on him, leaving him hollowed out.

Suddenly, the System’s harsh green light flickered ominously in the air above him, its digital presence an unwelcome reminder of the reality they were trapped in. The ambient noise of the cavern faded completely, replaced by the mechanical chime of an urgent notification.

Mobei-Jun forced his eyes open, his heart racing as he read the glowing text:

**[Self-Saving System: Out-of-Character optional quest punishment begins. Penalty Protocol: Wings of Freedom launched. Reward Balance: +500 Character Depth, +200 Redemption.]**

The chilling words echoed in Mobei-Jun's mind—a cold confirmation of the steep price he had to pay for actively defying fate to incapacitate Shang Qinghua and Shen Qingqiu. The realization sank in, icy and unyielding, yet it brought with it a strange, exhausted clarity. Closing his eyes once more, Mobei-Jun gave a faint nod of agreement, surrendering entirely to the current sweeping him away from the chaos.

Luo Binghe returned to Mobei-Jun's side, having finalized the necessary arrangements with Shen Qingqiu and Shang Qinghua. Without a single moment of hesitation, he hoisted his best friend onto his back, his brow furrowed with deep concern. Mobei-Jun's unresponsiveness gnawed at him, though he could not quite pinpoint the exact reason behind the catatonic state.

"MoMo, I'm going to get you somewhere safe," Luo Binghe said softly, trying hard to infuse his voice with reassurance. "They aren't going to hurt us… I need you to trust me on this. I promise I can handle things for now."

But Mobei-Jun felt as though he were trapped in a dense fog, the exhausting remnants of a panic attack tethering his mind in place. His heart raced and severe anxiety clawed at his insides, whispering that this was the end—that Luo Binghe would inevitably leave him behind, just like everyone else back on Earth. He had accepted, deep in his heart, that perhaps this separation was for the best. After all, Luo Binghe had a grand destiny to fulfill in this universe, one that did not include a baseline human side character.

The crushing weight of impending separation pressed down on Mobei-Jun, heavy and suffocating. He clung to the fleeting hope that Luo Binghe would stay, even as a realistic part of him resigned to being left behind.

As they walked out of the mountain tunnels, Luo Binghe worked out a strategic plan with Shen Qingqiu. They would head straight to the capital to assert control over the Emperor's palace—a highly risky venture that would demand every ounce of their strength and resolve. Meanwhile, Shang Qinghua would return to the northern ice palace with Mobei-Jun, ensuring that the local demon troops remained completely loyal during this tumultuous time.

Mobei-Jun felt the world around him blur, the sounds of their conversation fading into background noise. All he could focus on was the immense warmth of Luo Binghe's physical presence, anchoring him even as his mind raced with terrifying fears and doubts. Desperately, he wanted to believe in the promise, but the dark shadows of uncertainty loomed large, threatening to consume him entirely as they moved deeper into the unknown.

Suddenly, Mobei-Jun's eyes flashed open, startled by a freezing sensation on his forehead. He blinked rapidly to find Shang Qinghua grinning down at him mischievously, his icy touch both startling and oddly grounding. Luo Binghe growled in pure exasperation, clearly unamused by the former ice king's antics.

“You cannot play dead all night,” Shang Qinghua teased, his tone remaining light despite the gravity of their situation. “We need to head back to my palace immediately. I have to recover, thanks to your little stunt.”

Mobei-Jun was far too exhausted to experience any real shame as he let go of Luo Binghe, standing on his own two feet again. He caught a clear glimpse of Shang Qinghua for the first time, and his heart instantly sank. The little king looked even more fragile and delicate than Mobei-Jun had expected from his own rough notes.

Shang Qinghua's pale blue skin was almost completely white, his normally glowing eyes dull, as if the life had been drained from them. The decorative ice covering his body was heavily scratched and marred. Dark blue patches bubbled like open sores across the exposed surfaces of his horns, as well as the icy accents framing his face and arms. The reality of what losing his demonic powers meant was taking a visible toll.

Mobei-Jun felt Shen Qingqiu’s suspicious gaze drilling into him, the weight of it heavy and unyielding. He had nothing else left to give; all of his traps were officially spent. Luo Binghe was leaving him with the very person Mobei-Jun had just tried to kill. The absolute gravity of the situation hit him hard. Without warning, he dropped straight to his knees in front of Shang Qinghua, his forehead touching the cold ground.

His voice was entirely serious, filled with a sudden, rigid determination. “Little King, I pledge to protect you and make full amends for my actions.”

The silence that followed was palpable, heavy with the tension of unspoken words and unresolved conflicts. Mobei-Jun felt the chill of the floor seep into his knees, but he remained completely resolute, ready to face the steep consequences of his past mistakes.

From behind him, he could hear Luo Binghe’s exasperated sigh. “And you call me a simp,” his friend muttered, though a distinct hint of fondness laced the tone. Mobei-Jun wanted to smile at the familiar banter, but the weight of his newly sworn promise held his face still.

“Eh?!” Shang Qinghua jumped back a step, his heart racing in his chest more fiercely than it ever did during actual battle. He had never experienced such raw sincerity from anyone in his life. All he had wanted was a simple reassurance from the imposing figure that he was still alive and unharmed.

Shen Qingqiu crossed his arms and strode over to Mobei-Jun, giving his shoulder a gentle nudge with his foot. “Get up. You are going to regret making that vow. If anything happens to Shang Qinghua under your watch, I will hear about it in no time.”

Shang Qinghua quickly pushed Shen Qingqiu aside, well aware that Luo Binghe likely had more parting words to share. However, he did not want Mobei-Jun to feel even more overwhelmed than he already was. Instead, Shang Qinghua grasped Mobei-Jun’s arm tightly. With a determined look, the king unleashed his remaining elemental reserves to open a swirling frost portal straight to his northern palace, pulling Mobei-Jun through to the other side at his companion's side.

# Chapter 10: CHQPTER10

Shang Qinghua stepped into the grand throne room, a satisfied smile spreading across his face as he spotted his younger half-brother, Shang Jianjun, struggling with all his might to gain access to the announcement room. Watching Jianjun grapple with the intricate puzzle lock brought a wave of genuine amusement; it was a challenge that only the king himself could solve.

As Shang Jianjun abruptly halted his efforts, the entire demonic court gasped, their eyes widening at the sight of Shang Qinghua arriving alongside a massive, shirtless, and somewhat despondent-looking human. Shang Qinghua beamed as he pulled Mobei-Jun along, making his way directly toward the announcement door. With a swift motion, he inserted his hand into the locking mechanism, deftly solving the puzzle while flashing a smug grin at his brother. He stepped into the small, echoing broadcast booth and squeezed Mobei-Jun in beside him, entirely unbothered by the man's potential objections.

“I’m back!” Shang Qinghua declared, his voice ringing with enthusiasm through the palace speakers. “We can lower the threat level back to four. I expect full reports on mental statuses during the recent lockdown. And no, I won’t disclose what is going on with the emperor. It is not serious enough for me to stay at his side.”

He paused for dramatic effect, then added, “I’ve brought a new torture specialist human cultivator home with me. If any of you spot an oversized human with long black hair and... well, big arms, bring him straight to me. Shang Jianjun will lead the upcoming weapon inspection. Oh, and don’t bother writing reports on any dead or living creatures.”

With a playful wave, Shang Qinghua concluded, “Alright, alright… I’ll catch up with you all later. Love ya!” He made a loud kissy sound into the microphone before shoving Mobei-Jun out of the booth and turning his gaze sharply onto his brother. “Tell the staff to bring human food and heavy fur pelts to my room for my guest. Make it quick.”

"Brother, you dare bring a nearly naked human here and then keep him in your personal quarters? Are you breeding him?" Shang Jianjun chuckled, his tone dripping with mockery as he sought to provoke a reaction.

Mobei-Jun rose to his full, imposing height, glaring down at Shang Jianjun with eyes like cracked ice. He possessed zero patience for foolish inquiries. It had been an exhausting day, and he was in no mood for games. "How is the palace nursery? I assume you’re still in there munching on babies. You’ll fit nicely into a medium demon cube once I’m finished with your flesh, you bastard prince."

Shang Qinghua let out a frustrated sound, grabbing Mobei-Jun with all his strength and physically pulling the larger man behind his own frame. "We are tired. Excuse us!" he declared loudly.

As soon as they broke away from the room filled with whispers, Shang Qinghua rushed to his quarters, his mind racing. He could not afford to actively think about how... incredibly hot it

was to watch someone stand up to his brother in front of eighty demons who would happily devour an oversized human. In his currently drained state, the king simply could not dwell on it.

Once they were safely inside his bedroom, Shang Qinghua turned to Mobei-Jun, speaking urgently. "Having a literal death wish isn't exactly good for your health here. Someone could easily lock you in the basement and you'd die of hypothermia."

Shang Qinghua's horror deepened as he watched Mobei-Jun curl up tightly by the recently lit fire, his massive frame trembling violently as he tried to conserve warmth. It would have been endearing if the sight weren't so deeply distressing. Without wasting another moment, Shang Qinghua moved to his closet and pulled out his largest cloak, tossing extra pillows onto the mattress.

Taking a deep breath to steady his racing thoughts, Shang Qinghua fought to quell the rising tide of panic. The irrational fear of accidentally causing harm to this human and facing the absolute wrath of Shen Qingqiu consumed him. He draped the heavy cloak over Mobei-Jun's shivering form, his hands lingering for a brief moment to ensure the fabric was snug.

Just then, servants hurried into the room. Shang Qinghua positioned himself protectively against Mobei-Jun's back, feeling the man's intense shivers. "Draw a hot bath. Put the extra pelts on the bed. Quick," he ordered, his voice firm but tinged with urgency.

Shang Qinghua was thoroughly exhausted himself, grateful when a servant finally brought his medicine and a plate of protein jerky. He made quick work of the meal, feeling his body begin to relax and loosen up. As the servants left, Shang Qinghua waved them off, then turned his full attention back to Mobei-Jun. The human's desert-sun skin now had faint lines of ice forming on the side touching the floor—a testament to the ambient cold seeping into his body.

Shang Qinghua pulled the human up worriedly, brushing away the little patches of frost. He fixed Mobei-Jun with the most fearsome gaze he could muster. "You pledged yourself to me," he said firmly.

Mobei-Jun nodded, his deep blue-black eyes meeting Shang Qinghua's with an intensity that made the smaller man's heart stutter for a second.

"You won't be of any use to me if you are dead. Do exactly as I say: go take a bath and warm up. I am going to shower. If you need help, just call my name," Shang Qinghua commanded.

Mobei-Jun nodded again, a fleeting, inscrutable emotion flickering through his eyes. With visible effort, he pushed himself to his feet and made his way to the bathroom. Shang Qinghua watched him go, a swirl of relief and concern churning within his chest. When he heard the unmistakable splash of water filling the tub, he quickly selected a pair of fluffy, fully covered pajamas, hoping that if Mobei-Jun touched him accidentally, the layers would help stave off the chill.

Shang Qinghua felt a surge of willpower as he actively resisted the temptation to glance at Mobei-Jun in the spacious tub across from the shower cubicle. He stepped into his own stall,

turning on the taps, and let out a soft groan of pleasure as icy water cascaded over his skin. Perfect. It had been far too long since the Ice King had felt this level of cold, especially since falling ill. He savored every moment of cleansing his skin, treating his wavy golden hair to some much-needed softness.

Finally, he called out, “Sir? Are you still in the tub? Do you need me to come braid your hair? It is quite long.”

“No. Done it myself,” Mobei-Jun’s voice boomed, echoing loudly off the bathroom tile.

Shang Qinghua sighed, turning off the water and quickly drying off. He dressed in a hurry and made his way back into the main bedroom. The bathroom door remained ajar, revealing Mobei-Jun seated in the king's cloak, perched on a small chair pushed up right next to the threshold. Mobei-Jun’s gaze remained fixed straight ahead, not even flickering as Shang Qinghua approached.

With a light punch to Mobei-Jun’s arm to grab his attention, Shang Qinghua said, “I don’t usually invite would-be killers into my bed, but there is plenty of space, and the pelts should keep you warm enough. I will arrange for different quarters for you soon.”

Mobei-Jun remained entirely silent, still avoiding eye contact as he settled into the mattress beside him. Shang Qinghua, feeling a mix of fluster and concern, immediately began fussing over him to ensure he was tucked in warmly. He shifted closer, trying to read Mobei-Jun's closed expression, and spoke with a mock seriousness that masked his underlying anxiety. “If you try to leave, I will do worse than bite you. I’ll…” His hands flailed wildly as he attempted to conjure an imaginative threat, though Mobei-Jun's face only twitched slightly at the brief mention of his pointed shoe.

After a moment of exaggerated panting, Mobei-Jun finally muttered, his voice rough and exhausted, “It is too bright in here. Torture is already accomplished. Go to sleep.”

Shang Qinghua, intent on crafting a more inviting atmosphere, propped himself up on one elbow and conjured a swift bolt of ice to dim the lights, leaving only the soft, flickering glow of the hearth fire. Satisfied with his handiwork, he settled back down and playfully poked Mobei-Jun in the cheek. “Come on now. Why were you so determined to take me out back at the forge? Did I really seem that terrifying when I was piloting Luo Binghe’s body? I thought we were getting along. All that fire and those blows aimed at my legs were just plain rude!”

Mobei-Jun turned his head slightly, finally allowing his gaze to meet Shang Qinghua’s for a fleeting moment. “Rest, my king. All you need to know is that I am pledged to you. I am yours. What has happened before is of little consequence.”

Shang Qinghua felt a profound warmth spread through him at Mobei-Jun's words, a flicker of genuine hope igniting in the depths of his heart. He quietly studied Mobei-Jun's closed expression, searching for any remaining sign of the vulnerability he sensed beneath the surface. As he watched, Mobei-Jun’s eyes drifted shut, a rare moment of peace settling over the exhausted man. Unable to resist, Shang Qinghua reached out and gently tucked a loose strand of dark hair behind Mobei-Jun’s ear, his fingers brushing against the cool skin of his cheek.

“Mine? What a novel concept,” he mused, a soft, teasing lilt in his voice.

The intense intimacy of the gesture surprised him. In the past, Shang Qinghua had always kept people at a safe distance. He slept around, never keeping anyone around for long, and while he harbored deep feelings for Shen Qingqiu, the emperor belonged to a throne and a plethora of wives. Shen Qingqiu could never be truly his. But this human weapon cultivator was offering something entirely different—absolute, exclusive devotion.

# Chapter 11: chapter 11

Shen Qingqiu sat on the bed inside the cozy cottage where Luo Binghe and Mobei-Jun had been staying, watching the youth cook with an infectious, bright enthusiasm. It served as a pleasant distraction, but the emperor's mind remained entirely occupied with the daunting task ahead. The System had issued clear digital instructions yesterday: Mobei-Jun was actively trying to divert the mission, and Shen Qingqiu had to find a way to separate Luo Binghe from his companion's protective lockdown. But what was supposed to come next? He had spent the entire morning questioning the floating interface, only to receive zero further guidance.

As Luo Binghe gestured for him to join him at the laden table, his face bright with excitement, Shen Qingqiu let out a soft sigh and moved to sit beside the eager young man. Immediately, he felt the disorienting sensation of his own siphoned magic enveloping the air around them—a constant reminder of their accidental bond, yet a frustrating barrier that currently rendered the emperor powerless.

“I do not know who we should turn to for help in stabilizing the demon realm,” Shen Qingqiu admitted, his brow furrowing as he picked up his utensils. “There is so much backstabbing going on right now, but things might improve once Shang Qinghua is able to enter the court. He has the direct support of some of the toughest northern demons out there.”

Luo Binghe's amber eyes sparkled with sudden determination. “I have an idea, Shizun. Why don’t we enlist your demonic wives as our backup? They are fiercely loyal to you and only train to please you.” His gaze was filled with absolute admiration as he watched Shen Qingqiu, the supreme Emperor of Darkness, shovel down the food with an enthusiasm that suggested he had not eaten a proper meal in ages.

Shen Qingqiu let out an exasperated sigh, burying his face in his hands in mock defeat. He truly did not want to divulge his secret political embarrassments to this human stranger, but what other choice did he have? After taking a moment to gather his thoughts, he breathed out an annoyed breath. “It is a good idea on paper, but… honestly, they are not my wives. They are more like a… highly well-meaning, aggressive military sect. If I go there right now, I will pay a heavy price when I eventually regain my abilities.”

“Shizun? Mobei-Jun and I can gladly bear that cost for you,” Luo Binghe insisted earnestly, crossing his arms in a playful, dramatic attempt to appear physically impressive. “Once my stolen powers are gone, we can earn money together and handle any repercussions as a team.”

“No. The price they demand is something only I can physically pay.” Shen Qingqiu rubbed his temples, recalling the last time he had been forced to use literal zombie clones to appease the fierce women demons in his so-called "harem." It had drained a massive amount of his energy, and when the zombies were finally banished, he was left grappling with unwanted, lingering memories that sat like shadows in his mind. Yet, he had deemed it a price worth paying to secure his throne.

The weight of his past decisions bore down on him heavily, and Shen Qingqiu understood that the road ahead would be fraught with bizarre challenges. “It is highly complicated, Luo Binghe. Trust me, I would rather not revisit that particular arrangement.” He lifted his gaze to meet the youth's, hoping to convey the absolute gravity of the situation without divulging too many fan-fiction secrets.

“We can forge a brand-new compromise,” Luo Binghe suggested, his voice turning steady. “They are sworn to you, and their military power is immense. It could also inspire other neutral demons to join our cause.” He placed a comforting, warm hand on Shen Qingqiu's back. “Even if we cannot reach an immediate agreement, at least they will not betray you to the rebels.”

Shen Qingqiu rose to his feet, stretching his limbs as he carefully weighed their options. Time was of the essence. He let out a sharp sigh. “You can create a portal from my secret hideaway in the human realm. It is only about an hour’s ride from this valley. I will go get the horses ready.”

As Shen Qingqiu stepped away toward the stables, a mix of rigid determination and apprehension coursed through him. He knew this journey was crucial, not just for their immediate rebellion, but for his own sense of security and leadership. The stakes were incredibly high.

Left alone in the kitchen, Luo Binghe set about packing their traveling gear. He recalled Mobei-Jun's strict, anxious warnings from the night before, realizing his best friend had been entirely right to worry. He needed to be ready for anything once they arrived at the hideaway, gathering supplies meticulously to ensure they could handle any unexpected challenges along the road.

Once the horses were fully saddled, the emperor returned to the cabin threshold. “We are all set,” he announced, mounting his steed with practiced, elegant ease. “Let’s move out.”

Luo Binghe, however, was far from enthusiastic about the actual ride. In truth, he would have preferred to avoid horseback riding altogether. The experience felt incredibly monotonous, and every muscle in his temporary adult body tensed as he struggled to manage the powerful creature beneath him. As deep anxiety gnawed at him—his heart heavy with worry about how Mobei-Jun was faring in the ice realm—he desperately sought a distraction from the animal and the nagging ache in his chest.

He suddenly blurted out, “Shizun! Is your favorite color black, or is it just because you inherited the Empire of Darkness?”

Shen Qingqiu raised an elegant eyebrow, momentarily taken aback by the sudden inquiry. He forcefully repressed a sudden burst of laughter, not wanting to embarrass Luo Binghe, who was already visually cringing at his own random question. A hint of genuine amusement flickered in the emperor's eyes as he replied, “I have always known I would inherit the dark mantle. It is elegant and compliments my demonic features perfectly… I have never truly thought about a favorite color. Though at my private estate, I thoroughly enjoy plant life, so green would be high up on the list as well. Why do you ask?”

Luo Binghe shifted uncomfortably in his saddle, his cheeks flushing slightly under the weight of Shen Qingqiu's amused gaze. He had expected a simple, dismissive answer, but instead, he found himself caught in a moment of vulnerability that made his heart race. "I just... I thought it fit you," he mumbled, trying hard to regain his composure. "You know, the whole 'dark lord' aesthetic."

Shen Qingqiu chuckled, the sound light, clear, and teasing. “Is that so? You think I am some brooding figure straight out of a tragic tale? Perhaps I should start practicing my ominous villain laughter,” he replied, his tone thoroughly playful.

At the sound of Shen Qingqiu’s soft laugh, Luo Binghe felt his mind blissfully go completely blank; he would gladly make an absolute fool of himself for this godlike man. With massive dramatic flair, he tilted his head back and unleashed a theatrical, booming villain's laugh, subconsciously surrounding his body with a sudden surge of stolen shadow magic for maximum effect.

Unfortunately, his horse was less than impressed by the demonic theater and promptly tossed him right off its back.

Thankfully, the protective, passive aura of the emperor's magic ensured Luo Binghe landed safely on the grass, though he could still hear Shen Qingqiu desperately trying to stifle his roaring amusement.

Luo Binghe beamed up at him from the ground, his eyes sparkling with pure mischief. “So, did I look less intimidating in white?” He then deliberately attempted to sprawl out like the ridiculous anime figures of girls with impossibly large chests he used to collect as a teenager back on Earth.

Shen Qingqiu completely doubled over with laughter, the clear sound ringing out beautifully in the otherwise tranquil air. “You certainly looked more like a startled rabbit than a fearsome villain!” he replied, wiping a genuine tear from the corner of his eye. The sight of Luo Binghe, sprawled ridiculously on the dirt yet still managing a smug grin, was far too much for his stoic walls to handle.

Shen Qingqiu quickly dismounted and hurried over to help the youth to his feet, firmly grasping his arm as he gasped for breath from laughing so hard. “White and earthy colors suit you perfectly, Luo Binghe. Though I must say, my shadow magic does not quite fit your personality—it is entirely too dark and serious for someone like you.”

Luo Binghe felt as if his mind were completely short-circuiting with Shen Qingqiu's arm linked securely with his own. The touch of his Shizun in the physical world was a sensation he had never imagined could feel so profoundly right. They walked through the deepening afternoon, leading their horses through the thickening trees, and Luo Binghe could not help but quietly savor every second of the intimacy.

“We will need to make you look a bit more intimidating once we are inside the safe house,” Shen Qingqiu said with a cheerful smile, tying up the horses before heading into the small abode. Only then did he release Luo Binghe's arm to rummage through a trunk of clothing he shared with Shang Qinghua. As he searched for something suitable in a larger size, he called

out, “Would you like to talk to Mobei-Jun before we proceed? We could wait until tonight, but I am not sure how much rest we will get once the wives keep us occupied.”

“No... I am afraid Mobei-Jun would be distressed,” Luo Binghe replied, his voice tinged with genuine unease. “He acted as if I had completely betrayed him back at the forge, and I don't want him to harbor any defiance against Shang Qinghua. Could you perhaps talk to Shang Qinghua yourself and ensure there are no immediate issues between them?”

Luo Binghe felt incredibly awkward as he looked around the secret hideaway. The layout of the small house bore an uncanny, surreal resemblance to his own rental apartment back on Earth, albeit decorated with era-appropriate furniture. It pained his heart to realize that when Mobei-Jun had conceptualized this safe house in his notes, he had been thinking of Luo Binghe’s real home as the ultimate definition of safety.

Shen Qingqiu entirely misinterpreted the awkwardness, assuming the youth was just uncomfortable over his friend's condition and the prospect of changing clothes in front of him. Pulling out his enchanted mirror to call Shang Qinghua, the emperor headed back toward the door, pausing momentarily to glance over his shoulder. "Bunny, go ahead and get dressed. Choose reds and blacks. I trust you to channel your inner darkness. I will be right back."

Luo Binghe blushed furiously. When he stumbled over to the mirror on the wall, he saw that not only his face but his entire chest was blooming with a deep, pleased embarrassment. Slapping both of his cheeks simultaneously, he forced himself to stare at his reflection. "Be calm and collected like Shizun. You have to do this. You can do this."

With a sharp exhale, he quickly grabbed a set of dark red clothing and a heavy black over-robe, hoping the contrast would make his physical frame look intimidating enough to pass as a high demon.

Peering out the window, Luo Binghe watched as Shen Qingqiu sat on the grass outside, talking with complete, relaxed ease to Shang Qinghua through the glowing glass. An irrational surge of possessive jealousy immediately flared up inside him, making his heart pound viciously against his ribs. How dare anyone else get to see his Shizun smile and laugh so freely?

Luo Binghe took a deep breath, trying hard to quell the envy raging within him. He logically knew that Shen Qingqiu's interactions with the former king were entirely platonic and business-related, but his possessive instincts were incredibly hard to suppress. He had to remind himself that they were here on a high-stakes mission, and he needed to remain focused.

After finishing with the layers, Luo Binghe took a moment to examine his full appearance in a small, polished metal mirror. The garments fit him beautifully, accentuating his broad shoulders and muscular torso. Despite his earlier embarrassment, he had to admit that he cut an impressively formidable figure. He practiced a few stern, unyielding expressions, trying to mimic the calm and collected demeanor of the emperor.

Satisfied with his progress, Luo Binghe stepped outside just as Shen Qingqiu was wrapping up his conversation with the north. The emperor's eyes lit up the moment he saw his disciple, a small, approving smile playing on his lips.

"Well, don't you look the part," Shen Qingqiu said, standing up and dusting off his elegant robes. "How do you feel?"

"Ready," Luo Binghe replied, his voice steady. "Did you manage to clear things up with Shang Qinghua?"

Shen Qingqiu nodded. "Yes, everything is in proper order. Mobei-Jun might be a bit... difficult to handle right now, but Shang Qinghua will manage him. Now, let's focus entirely on our part. Remember, we need to maintain an unyielding front once we step into the territory. You will act as my hands. Can you do that for me?"

Luo Binghe nodded seriously. Feeling a sudden surge of bold, possessive courage, he grabbed onto Shen Qingqiu's hand, bringing it up to his lips to press a firm kiss against the back of his skin while maintaining unwavering eye contact.

Luo Binghe spoke clearly, "With Shizun's guidance, we cannot fail. Do not doubt this servant's abilities to execute your instructions."

"Hold back the dramatics," Shen Qingqiu countered, though he pulled his fingers back only to quickly deploy his fan, hiding his face because he was secretly smiling like an absolute fool. "Okay… I need you to focus heavily on the darkness swirling inside of your chest and feel for the matching frequency of the demon realm on the other side. Once you connect with it, slash your hand down to open the path. I will guide our walk to the compound—just hold onto my hand."

Luo Binghe experienced a massive rush of warmth at the physical contact. The simple touch sent his pulse racing. He was entirely determined to prove himself worthy of his Shizun's trust, refusing to let the man down.

"Understood," he replied. He could feel the volatile power of the siphoned shadow magic bubbling within him—a raw, feral energy he had historically struggled to control. But with Shen Qingqiu standing right beside him, he felt more confident than ever before.

Shen Qingqiu positioned himself flush against Luo Binghe's side, his expression a perfect mixture of focus and deep warmth. "Remember, the demon realm can be entirely unpredictable. Stay close and listen to my guidance. If you begin to feel overwhelmed by the dark energy, just focus completely on me."

Luo Binghe nodded, feeling the weight of responsibility settle comfortably on his shoulders. He reached out, entwining his fingers tightly with Shen Qingqiu's. It was an incredibly grounding sensation, reminding him that they were facing this universe together as a unit.

"Now, concentrate," Shen Qingqiu instructed, his voice dropping to a low, steady whisper. "Feel the darkness within you. Let it rise and connect with the ambient energy on the other side."

Luo Binghe closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. He visualized the swirling chaos of the demon realm—a place filled with heavy shadows and whispers. As he allowed his own stolen magic to surge, he felt the resonance click into place, a massive connection forming in the fabric of the air.

With a swift, decisive motion, he slashed his hand downward, channeling that energy into the empty space before them. A portal instantly rippled into existence, shimmering with dark, volatile hues, its edges crackling with raw power.

“Good,” Shen Qingqiu praised, entirely unable to hide the pride in his tone. “Now, let us go.”

Luo Binghe stepped forward, pulling Shen Qingqiu with him through the shimmering tear. The exact moment they crossed the threshold, the atmospheric pressure shifted, enveloping them in the familiar, chaotic energy of the demon realm.

As they stepped through to the other side, a heavy surge of adrenaline coursed through Luo Binghe. The landscape sprawled before them, wild and untamed, with gnarled trees reaching toward darkened, stormy skies. Shadows flitted about the perimeter, whispering secrets that sent an unsettling chill down his spine.

“Stay close,” Shen Qingqiu instructed, his voice calm and measured as he scanned the horizon. “We need to reach the compound quickly. The longer we remain exposed here, the more unwanted attention we risk attracting.”

As they walked hand-in-hand, Luo Binghe mentally revisited the chapters he had read about the Wives in Waiting (WIW), the formidable military sect of demons Mobei-Jun had created. In the novel, Shen Qingqiu and Shang Qinghua possessed a keen sense of justice, frequently stepping in to rescue both demons and humans whenever the occasion arose. Among those they saved, many had developed a fierce, unyielding loyalty to Shen Qingqiu, training diligently as elite warriors to serve the Emperor.

Shen Qingqiu had visited their compound on several occasions, leveraging their immense military prowess while deeply respecting their contributions to his throne. Curiously, he had strictly refrained from choosing an active wife from among them—a decision that only spurred the Wives on to continuously better themselves in hopes of eventually winning his ultimate favor.

To Luo Binghe’s immense surprise, the military compound loomed much larger than he had anticipated from Mobei-Jun's notes. He could already make out the imposing, heavily armored forms of female guards stationed atop the watchtowers, transforming the fortress into something resembling an impenetrable medieval castle. He swallowed hard, his stomach churning with deep anxiety. He desperately hoped this dangerous endeavor would succeed; the last thing he wanted was to try and fight his way out of such a formidable stronghold.

As they cautiously approached the perimeter, Luo Binghe’s heart raced. The towering stone walls loomed ahead, casting long, ominous shadows across their path. He could feel the palpable tension in the air, as if the very landscape held its breath, anticipating their next move.

Shen Qingqiu gestured for them to halt, crouching low behind the leafy cover of a thicket. “We need to assess the guards’ movements. Timing is absolutely crucial.”

Peering through the thick foliage, Luo Binghe watched as the female guards patrolled methodically, their dark armor glinting ominously in the dim light. Each carried a massive polearm with ease, exuding a deadly confidence that sent a sharp shiver of apprehension through him. He couldn't help but admire their martial strength, but he also knew that any slight misstep would lead to an immediate disaster.

“We should wait for a shift change,” Shen Qingqiu murmured, his keen eyes focusing sharply on the watchtowers. “They seem to rotate every half hour. If we can slip toward the threshold during the swap, we might avoid an unnecessary conflict.”

Luo Binghe nodded, his mind racing with thoughts of what lay beyond those imposing gates. He remembered reading the chapters about the Wives in Waiting—both their historic valor and their fierce, protective dedication to Shen Qingqiu. Would they be welcoming to a newcomer, or would they see him as a hostile intruder?

As the minutes ticked by, Luo Binghe felt the suffocating weight of uncertainty pressing down on him. He glanced at Shen Qingqiu, who remained entirely calm and collected—a steady, anchoring presence in the mounting chaos of his thoughts.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the guards began to shift positions. Luo Binghe experienced a sudden rush of adrenaline-fueled determination. “Now?” he whispered, barely containing his eagerness.

“Now,” Shen Qingqiu replied, his voice dropping to a firm whisper.

They darted from their hiding place, moving swiftly and silently toward the compound’s main entrance. As they approached the heavy iron gates, Luo Binghe’s heart pounded violently against his ribs. He could not shake the persistent feeling that they were being actively watched, but he forcefully pushed the panic aside.

Just as they reached the threshold, a sudden noise echoed sharply from behind them—the distinct crack of a snapping twig. Luo Binghe’s combat instincts instantly kicked in. He spun around to face the source of the sound, his hands curling tightly, ready to defend his Shizun.

Emerging from the shadows was an elegant male demon lord dressed in pristine warrior gear, featuring intricate, light grey fan patterns stitched throughout the black silk. His long hair was swept back elegantly, but his expression was dark and unyielding. His hand rested firmly on the hilt of his sword, ready to launch an attack. “Prove your identities," the warrior commanded. "What business do you have at these gates?”

“Liu Qingge, I was coming specifically to see you,” Shen Qingqiu said, stepping forward. “It is Shen Qingqiu. My magical abilities are currently trapped within this youth, Luo Binghe. I have never had a greater, more urgent need for the help of my Wives in Waiting.”

Shen Qingqiu slowly deployed his elegant fan and held it out toward Liu Qingge, the current commander of the sect, as a token of absolute proof. Sensing that Luo Binghe was frozen in

shock at his side, Shen Qingqiu turned to him quickly, speaking in a low, commanding tone. “Pull the shadows about you right now and forge them into a warrior to touch Liu Qingge. Just like we practiced back at the cabin.”

Luo Binghe's mind short-circuited for a split second as he processed the instructions. Taking a deep breath, he steadied his racing pulse, reaching deep to feel the familiar, volatile pull of siphoned energy within his chest. The ambient shadows around the thicket seemed to instantly thicken, coiling like living, ink-black tendrils at his command. He concentrated with intense focus, visualizing the exact form he needed to create—a shadowy sentinel, solid yet ethereal, ready to defend his Shizun.

With a swift flick of his wrist, he summoned the darkness, twisting and shaping the tendrils until they materialized into a towering figure. The shadow warrior stood tall, its features completely obscured but its broad stance undeniably menacing. Luo Binghe felt his physical energy drain slightly as he poured his raw willpower into the creation, but the sheer power surging through his veins mingled beautifully with the adrenaline of the moment.

“Liu Qingge,” Shen Qingqiu called out again, his tone turning increasingly urgent. “We need your immediate trust. We have absolutely no time for court formalities. We are being hunted by the usurpers, and if we do not act swiftly, it will be too late for the empire.”

Liu Qingge searched Shen Qingqiu’s face intently before walking forward to touch the shadow creature. The moment his hand brushed the cold aura, he recognized the unique magical frequency. It was indeed their Emperor's supreme shadow magic.

Liu Qingge’s rigid posture instantly relaxed. He raised a hand, signaling to the watchtowers to open the heavy gates. The massive iron panels creaked open, revealing the entirety of the Wives in Waiting military force awaiting them in the grand courtyard beyond. [1]

Shen Qingqiu offered a small smile, leaning forward to press a brief, elegant kiss against Liu Qingge’s cheek before walking past him. Exuding absolute regal confidence, the emperor entered the compound with Luo Binghe quick on his heels. The youth carefully commanded the massive shadow warrior to follow closely behind them, deliberately demonstrating his raw power to the onlookers.

An audible, collective murmur rippled through the gathered demonic warriors, every single eye locking onto Shen Qingqiu’s vulnerable human form.

Shen Qingqiu raised his voice as much as his human lungs would allow, his tone carrying beautifully across the stone yard. “My Wives! I must return order to the realm. Upon losing my baseline abilities, my high council has gone directly against my will, trying to aggressively expand our borders. I have successfully located the unknowing recipient of my magic. While I cannot wield the core myself right now, I am still your Emperor. I need your absolute military support. Shang Qinghua is currently gathering his northern forces to assist, but we must launch an immediate attack on the capital to regain the palace. I am entirely willing to grant you whatever you wish as a reward.”

The courtyard buzzed with a potent mix of shock and burning admiration as the emperor’s words echoed off the high walls. The warriors of the Wives in Waiting exchanged rapid

glances, their expressions shifting from initial skepticism to fierce eagerness. They had always known Shen Qingqiu as a symbol of absolute strength, and seeing him stand before them—vulnerable yet completely resolute—only deepened their devotion.

Luo Binghe experienced a massive swell of pride as he watched his Shizun command the total attention of the crowd. The emperor's natural charisma was completely palpable. Even stripped of his powers, he exuded a quiet air of authority that effortlessly drew people in. Behind them, the shadow warrior loomed like a dark sentinel, adding physical weight to the speech.

“An attack on the capital?” one of the elite warriors called out, her voice cutting through the murmurs. “Is such a feat even possible right now? The council has heavily fortified the palace defenses ever since your sudden disappearance.”

“We possess the ultimate advantage of surprise,” Shen Qingqiu countered smoothly, his voice remaining perfectly steady. “They firmly believe I am gone for good, assuming I have relinquished my claim to the throne. But they forget that I am still standing, and I am not alone. With your elite skills and unyielding loyalty, we will reclaim what is rightfully mine—and yours.”

Liu Qingge stepped forward, his expression shifting from careful contemplation to rigid determination as he drew his blade and saluted. “Shen Qingqiu is correct. The high council has grown entirely arrogant in their stolen power. They have vastly underestimated the unity of our forces. If we strike now, we not only reclaim the palace, but we send a message to the entire realm that we will not be trifled with. We are stronger together.”

A roaring murmur of agreement rippled through the hundreds of warriors, and Luo Binghe felt the entire energy of the compound shift. He could see a literal fire igniting in their eyes—the collective resolve to fight against the corrupt council. It wasn't just simple loyalty to the crown anymore; it was about a shared dream for the future of the realm.

“What do you propose for the initial vanguard?” one of the older, battle-scarred warriors asked, stepping forward with a steely, serious gaze. “We need a tactical plan, and we need it quickly.”

Shen Qingqiu nodded, deeply grateful for the immediate support but acutely aware of the crushing weight of responsibility on his shoulders. “We will first gather intelligence on the council’s internal movements and assess their perimeter defenses. I have specific allies operating in the shadows who can aid us in this. We will need to precisely coordinate our forces, ensuring each of you plays directly to your individual combat strengths. If we can draw the council’s attention away from the main palace gates with a massive distraction, we can easily slip inside the inner chambers and regain total control.”

Before he could continue detailing the strategy, two breathtakingly beautiful, well-blessed female demons—who looked so perfectly identical they might have been placed through a modern copy machine—stepped forward from the front ranks. They swayed in unison, their eyes locked hungrily on the emperor.

“Our Junshang,” they purred in a sultry, synchronized chorus. “Shall we be blessed with a night of your exclusive company again before the battle? All of us thoroughly failed to bear a royal heir for you during your last visit, and we have all improved our training immensely to compensate.”

“No,” Shen Qingqiu cut in firmly. “I was thinking that as a reward, I would allow the Wives in Waiting full political representation at court and a permanent station in my palace on equal level with any other military force in the realm. You all have impressed me time and time again with your unyielding loyalty, and that needs to be rewarded properly.”

Shen Qingqiu spoke rapidly, his hands beginning to shake slightly at the terrifying memories of his last visit. He desperately needed to escape the crowd and calm his racing pulse, but he forced himself to maintain his cold, stoic expression. He wanted to give these warriors the unflappable ruler they thought was worthy of their ultimate devotion.

The two twin female demons exchanged rapid glances, their sultry expressions shifting into a distinct mix of surprise and heavy disappointment as the emperor's rejection hung in the air. The overall tension in the courtyard shifted instantly. Luo Binghe could feel the underlying currents of their volatile emotions—burning longing, raw ambition, and perhaps a touch of deep resentment. He stepped physically closer to Shen Qingqiu's side, ready to lend his towering adult frame as a protective shield.

“Junshang,” one of the identical demons spoke again, her voice still purring but now distinctly tinged with frustration. “You know we only wish to serve you fully. We have always been loyal, and we are incredibly eager to prove our biological worth to the crown. Surely a single night of your company would solidify our eternal allegiance before we march to war.”

Shen Qingqiu took a deep breath, forcing his human lungs to calm. Memories of their last encounter flooded his thoughts—intense, overwhelming, and a stark reminder of the burdens he had carried to secure his throne.

“I deeply appreciate your loyalty,” the emperor said, keeping his voice steady but firm. “But this is not the time for personal pleasures. We are standing on the very brink of a massive war, and I need every single one of you entirely focused on the tactical task ahead. We must protect our realm first and foremost.”

The massive crowd shifted restlessly. Some seasoned warriors nodded in grim agreement, while others exchanged quiet whispers, their expressions wary. They were entirely accustomed to the rewards of military loyalty taking on more intimate forms, and Shen Qingqiu’s sudden insistence on a strictly political approach was completely unexpected.

Liu Qingge stepped forward, his voice low but commanding enough to silence the murmurs. “Shen Qingqiu knows exactly what is best for us all. We must prioritize the absolute safety of our realm above everything else. Your dedication will be rewarded in due time, but first, we need to stand completely united against the high council.”

“Very well,” the second duplicate demon replied, her tone still smooth but now laced with a begrudging respect. “We will support your battle plan, Junshang. But do not think for a

moment that we will forget your promise of political rewards. We will hold you to your word."

"I would expect nothing less from my finest warriors," Shen Qingqiu replied, forcing a polite smile that felt incredibly strained against his cheeks. "Now, let us focus entirely on gathering intelligence. I need scouts to report on the council's internal movements, and I want our best strategists to begin drafting immediate blueprints for the palace assault."

The crowd began to disperse, warriors moving with a renewed, fierce determination as the awkward tension faded into focused military drive. Luo Binghe experienced a massive wave of relief wash over him. Shen Qingqiu had successfully commanded absolute respect, reaffirming his position as their emperor despite his temporary lack of magic.

Stepping protectively in front of his Shizun, Luo Binghe subtly commanded his shadow creature to take hold of Shen Qingqiu's heavy traveling bags. He could sense the hidden distress vibrating from the older man, recognizing that the emperor was on the absolute verge of a panic attack.

Luo Binghe glanced over at Liu Qingge, who was now accompanied by a highly formidable-looking demon woman. Despite her lack of traditional horns or scales, she exuded an incredibly intimidating physical presence. Luo Binghe instantly identified her from Mobei-Jun's notes as the deadly general, Sha Hualing. In the original novel chapters he had skimmed back on Earth, he had always assumed she was the supreme leader in charge of the compound, not this elegant Liu Qingge character. If he hadn't been so worried about his Shizun, he would have savored the opportunity to study the warrior dynamic closer.

With as much commanding authority as his adult voice could muster, Luo Binghe addressed the remaining leaders. "Junshang needs to rest immediately. Given his current human condition, he does not fully understand his own physical limits. If we could be directed to the imperial baths and kitchens, and have a private room arranged, it would be greatly appreciated."

"Our Emperor has his own private suite kept ready here; I will lead you both personally," Sha Hualing said confidently. She offered Liu Qingge a respectful nod before guiding the guests through the stone corridors. With immense pride, she pointed out all the new military facilities that had been added since the emperor's last official visit.

Luo Binghe was taken aback by the sheer size of the stronghold, having never anticipated it would be this expansive. A sudden wave of intense insecurity washed over him. Everyone in this realm seemed to want a piece of his Shizun. He worried that once he eventually returned to his normal, terminal human form, Shen Qingqiu would cast him aside as useless. In his sudden grief, he vividly imagined himself trapped here in the future—training tirelessly in the dirt just to become a functional tool for his precious Shizun, eagerly awaiting a fleeting moment where they might reunite.

Suddenly jolted from his dark thoughts, Luo Binghe felt a sharp tug on his dark sleeve. He looked down to see Shen Qingqiu signaling him to stop walking.

“We only require the one room tonight. Thank you for your exceptional hospitality as always, Sha Hualing. I hope we can have a proper conversation that isn’t strictly war-related very soon. You and Liu Qingge have certainly exceeded my expectations and hold my highest respect,” Shen Qingqiu said, bowing politely.

He then led Luo Binghe into a magnificent set of private apartments, passing through a large, heavily warded door that instantly sealed out all ambient noise from the bustling outer compound.

The moment the heavy oak door clicked shut behind them, a profound sense of calm enveloped the space. The room was elegantly furnished with rich demonic silks, soft lighting, and plush seating that practically invited relaxation. Luo Binghe took a moment to absorb the safe atmosphere, experiencing a mix of relief and lingering apprehension. He watched Shen Qingqiu collapse onto a seat, exhaling a massive breath he hadn’t realized he was holding.

“Are you alright?” Luo Binghe asked, deep concern lacing his tone. The remnants of Shen Qingqiu’s panic still lingered in the air, and he wanted to ensure his Shizun felt entirely safe in this closed environment.

Shen Qingqiu nodded, though his elegant features remained slightly strained. “I am fine. Just... adjusting to the sheer volume of everything.” He glanced around the grand room, his gaze landing on a large arched window overlooking the courtyard. “It is highly impressive how much this sect has changed. I did not expect this stronghold to evolve so dramatically in my absence.” [1]

Luo Binghe stepped closer to the seat, experiencing an overwhelming urge to comfort the vulnerable emperor. “You deserve all of this security and more, Shizun,” he said earnestly, looking down at him. “You have worked incredibly hard to build it.”

Shen Qingqiu turned his face up, a faint, genuine smile breaking through his rigid walls. “Thank you, Luo Binghe. Your support truly means a lot to me.”

The emperor took a deep breath, consciously gathering his composure. “But we must focus on our current situation. There is much to calculate regarding the assault and our next tactical steps.”

Luo Binghe nodded, his mind shifting gears. “What do you need from me? I will do absolutely whatever it takes to assist you.”

Shen Qingqiu’s eyes narrowed slightly, a familiar spark of sharp determination igniting within his gaze. “We need to strategize the vanguard layout. Sha Hualing and Liu Qingge possess highly valuable intelligence about the high council’s internal movements. If we can precisely align our siphoned shadow magic with their troop numbers, we have a genuine chance to turn the tide in our favor.”

Hours flew by in a blur of focused collaboration as they meticulously detailed the upcoming siege, scribbling quick notes and drafting potential battle maps on parchment. With each shared idea and strategic insight, Luo Binghe’s confidence blossomed beautifully. Feeling deeply invigorated by the closeness, he stepped up behind the seat and wrapped a large arm

around Shen Qingqiu's shoulders, squeezing gently. "Let's take a bath, Shizun. We need to unwind and get some proper rest before tomorrow."

Shen Qingqiu startled visibly at the sudden suggestion, his head shaking vigorously. Noticing the immediate flash of disappointment in Luo Binghe's amber eyes, the emperor quickly clarified, his voice dropping to a flustered murmur. "The imperial baths are entirely non-gendered here. I… I do not want to attract any unwanted attention from the guard. They... they want something from me right now that I simply cannot provide in this human condition. It feels entirely wrong to dangle my presence in front of them."

"I will be right there with you the entire time," Luo Binghe reassured him softly. He stepped around the chair, gently rubbing Shen Qingqiu's shoulder to soothe the building unease. "I can shroud the entire pool in a massive dome of solid shadows; absolutely no one will be able to see us inside, I promise. You don't have to give anything you don't want to give to anyone, Shizun. Just trust me."

Shen Qingqiu hesitated, his elegant brow furrowing in deep thought. The mere idea of stepping into a shared, non-gendered bath where others might see him—even if entirely shrouded in thick shadows—stirred a heavy mix of anxiety and historical discomfort within his chest. But as he looked up into Luo Binghe's earnest, unwavering eyes, he felt a sudden flicker of warmth. The prospect of sharing a fleeting moment of peace with his disciple, entirely away from the crushing weight of royal responsibility and war, was highly tempting.

"Binghe…" the emperor started, but the sheer softness in the youth's voice and the reassuring squeeze on his shoulder made him pause his defenses. "You truly believe it will be alright?"

"I promise you, Shizun. I will be right there by your side the entire time. No one will even know we are in the water," Luo Binghe insisted, his eyes bright with protective determination. "And if any guard tries to approach the perimeter, I will handle them. You just focus entirely on relaxing."

Shen Qingqiu took a long, deep breath, letting the rigid tension drain from his posture. "All right," he finally agreed, albeit reluctantly. "But if I feel uncomfortable at any given moment, we leave immediately. No arguments."

"Deal!" Luo Binghe grinned, his excitement completely infectious. He quickly guided Shen Qingqiu toward the imperial bathing area, his spirit thoroughly buoyed by the prospect of spending quiet time together.

When they arrived, the atmosphere was profoundly serene, with thick white steam rising gently from the warm water. The bath was elegantly designed, surrounded by smooth volcanic rocks and lush demonic plants that gave the cavern a natural, peaceful feel. Luo Binghe took a focused moment to manifest a heavy, shifting barrier of solid shadows around the pool, ensuring absolute privacy from the rest of the compound.

As they stepped into the water, Shen Qingqiu felt the intense warmth envelop his frame, effortlessly easing the tight knots of tension in his human muscles. He forced himself to focus entirely on the soothing sensation rather than the potential for prying eyes. Luo Binghe settled comfortably right beside him, the water lapping gently against their skin.

“I’m glad we did this,” Luo Binghe said, leaning back against the rocky edge of the bath, his expression relaxed. “You deserve a real break, Shizun. You’ve been carrying so much on your shoulders ever since we crossed over.”

Shen Qingqiu allowed himself a small, genuine smile, deeply appreciating the sentiment. “It is incredibly nice to experience this moment of peace,” he admitted softly. “I didn’t fully realize how much my body needed to unwind.”

They chatted quietly, their murmuring voices blending beautifully with the soothing sounds of the bubbling water. Luo Binghe entertained him with amusing, real-world stories about Mobei-Jun's reclusive antics back on Earth. Shen Qingqiu found himself laughing clearly, the day's political stress gradually melting away into the steam.

Afterward, they made their way through the corridors to the now-deserted imperial kitchen, gathering a plate of food before heading straight back to the emperor’s private rooms. Once inside, they laid back onto the massive plush bed, which was easily spacious enough to fit at least six people comfortably.

Shen Qingqiu reached into his robes and handed his enchanted communication mirror to Luo Binghe. “Make the call to Shang Qinghua. I’ll let you in on a specific secret regarding demonic magic… the major downside to using siphoned shadow energy is that it can quickly cause an inexperienced host to lose their identity. It actively lowers your IQ to the point where you are driven strictly by base, feral instincts. Talk to your friend right now to help ground your mind and recover from the shock of the teleportation spell.” [1]

Luo Binghe felt a sudden wave of anxiety wash over him, but he wanted to honor Shen Qingqiu’s request. Taking a deep breath, he held up the enchanted glass. He carefully recited the activation phrase the emperor had taught him, and within moments, Shang Qinghua’s heavily demonic visage flickered into view through the ripples. The sight was highly unusual; Luo Binghe had always known the Northern King to be a reclusive strategist who preferred to orchestrate plots from the safety of the dark, rather than step into the limelight.

“Luo Binghe?” Shang Qinghua raised an elegant, icy eyebrow, a hint of surprise coloring his tone. “What can I do for you?”

Luo Binghe coughed nervously, feeling the weight of the confrontation. “Can I talk to Mobei-Jun, please?”

Shang Qinghua’s expression softened slightly, his sharp demonic features adopting a more approachable demeanor. He glanced off to the side of his bedchambers, then abruptly thrust the mirror directly into Mobei-Jun’s hands.

Luo Binghe’s gaze was immediately drawn to the thick collar fastened securely around his best friend's neck. A sharp shiver ran down his spine. “Mobei-Jun? Why the hell do you have a collar and a leash on right now?”

“Shang Qinghua is under the highly mistaken impression that I might cause harm to myself otherwise,” Mobei-Jun replied in his characteristic, flatly factual tone. “We are still actively

negotiating a compromise for my house arrest. But do not worry; the king has cared for my condition far more than I actually deserve."

Luo Binghe hesitated, carefully considering Mobei-Jun's words. "I… I guess if you are personally okay with the arrangement… We are currently staying at the Wives in Waiting compound, and the fortress is absolutely enormous. You have to see this place for yourself, Mobei-Jun! Also, there is every type of demonic gender training here; they are all beautiful and a bit intimidating," he added, trying hard to inject some lighthearted enthusiasm into the conversation to break the awkwardness.

"Ah… I was already aware of that layout," Mobei-Jun admitted, his gaze dropping slightly away from the glass. "I would strongly advise you to stay as close to Shen Qingqiu as possible while you are staying there." A sudden flicker of guilt crossed his features, and he actively avoided Luo Binghe's eyes through the mirror. After a brief pause, he added, "Shang Qinghua and I have pressing matters to discuss. Is there anything else you require?"

Luo Binghe instantly sensed the shift in his best friend's demeanor—the way his gaze averted and the air between them thickened with unspoken, rigid tension. He desperately wanted to press further to unravel the mystery behind the leash and the bizarre dynamic brewing in the ice realm, but he also respected the boundaries his brother had set.

"No, that is all for now," Luo Binghe replied, his voice laced with a mixture of concern and reluctance. "Just take care of yourself, okay? I will keep a close eye on Shen Qingqiu."

Mobei-Jun nodded, his expression softening slightly. "Be well, Luo Binghe."

With that, the magical connection through the enchanted mirror flickered out. Mobei-Jun's image faded completely, leaving Luo Binghe staring at his own reflection. He took a quiet moment to gather his thoughts, a sense of grim resolve washing over him. He placed the mirror onto the side table and sat up, noticing that Shen Qingqiu was already dressed in soft sleep silks, smiling at him slightly from the cushions.

Luo Binghe got up with a heavy sigh to find his own sleep clothes, speaking softly as he changed. "I do not like the fact that Shang Qinghua has Mobei-Jun on a physical leash but… if it truly protects his state of mind right now, I suppose it is acceptable."

Shen Qingqiu snuggled down into the luxurious bedding, letting out a soft yawn as he watched Luo Binghe change entirely unashamedly. The emperor was profoundly grateful that the youth could not read his inner thoughts—specifically about how he wouldn't mind taking Luo Binghe as his official wife in this exact bed once the war was won.

Instead, he forcefully steered his mind to comment on the northern duo to keep his cool facade intact. "Shang Qinghua can be incredibly over-dramatic. I highly suspect Mobei-Jun's silence terrifies him, so I am not at all surprised they are butting heads in the palace. Just give them proper time and trust Shang Qinghua ensuring they do not kill each other."

Luo Binghe pulled on his sleep garments, casting a sidelong glance at Shen Qingqiu, who appeared entirely too comfortable sprawled in the center of the mattress. The domestic sight made him smile despite the lingering heaviness in his heart regarding his friend. "I hope your

assessment is right," he said softly, sitting down on the edge of the mattress. "Mobei-Jun deserves to be entirely free, but I understand that sometimes… people simply need to feel safe."

"That is entirely true," Shen Qingqiu replied, his voice turning incredibly gentle in the dim room. "Safety can look vastly different for everyone in the demon realm. I think it is important for us to remember that Mobei-Jun has been through an immense amount of trauma. He might not view the collar as a restriction, but rather as a tangible means to help him cope with his panic. And as for Shang Qinghua, he deeply cares for Mobei-Jun, even if his behavioral methods are a bit unconventional."

"Unconventional is a massive understatement," Luo Binghe muttered, shaking his head with a light chuckle. "But I do trust that they will find a way to work it out. Mobei-Jun is incredibly strong, and he will find his voice again." He paused, contemplating the stormy sky outside the window, before adding softly, "I just hope it happens soon."

"Let's focus on what we can actually do," Shen Qingqiu said, shifting his weight to prop himself up on one elbow. "You support Mobei-Jun as best you can from here. And maybe, just maybe, I can help Shang Qinghua realize that he doesn't need to be so incredibly dramatic all the time."

Luo Binghe chuckled softly, the lingering tension in his broad shoulders finally easing. "You really think we can help those two with that?"

"Hope springs eternal," Shen Qingqiu replied with a confident smirk. "Now, come here and get some rest. We will need every ounce of our physical strength for whatever tomorrow brings."

Without further hesitation, Luo Binghe climbed into the massive bed beside Shen Qingqiu, letting the profound warmth of his mentor's presence envelop him entirely. As he settled into the plush pillows, a wave of comfort washed over his racing thoughts. "You're right, Shizun. We will face it together."

As they both drifted into a deep, peaceful sleep, the worries of the dangerous world outside faded completely, leaving only the soft sounds of the night and their quiet, synchronized breathing. In the back of their minds, however, they both understood that the upcoming siege would demand immense strength and compassion—not just to resolve the chaos surrounding Mobei-Jun and Shang Qinghua, but to safely navigate the powerful bond growing between themselves, too.

End Notes

Hellooooo I have decided to resurrect my fic I wrote 2 years ago but make it better lmao. If you want to see my OG story you can it's just called Reverse, Reverse. Although I'll give you warning I'm planning on overhaulling the story starting from chapter 18 the beginning chapters should be the same. Hope you enjoy

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!